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Running Head: EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN SAUDI  
ARABIA

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN SAUDI ARABIA:  
EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPANTS OF THE SAUDI OXFORD PROGRAM  
FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctorate of Philosophy in Educational Leadership

Grand Forks, North Dakota

December  
2018

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## EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN SAUDI ARABIA

This dissertation, submitted by Azizah Alogali in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctorate in Educational Leadership, PhD from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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Date

# EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN SAUDI ARABIA

## PERMISSION

Title            Educational Leadership Development in Saudi Arabia:  
Experiences of Participants of the Saudi Oxford Program for  
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Azizah Fhad Algoli  
November 7, 2018

## EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN SAUDI ARABIA

“Do you want to be safe and good, or do you want to take a chance and be great?”

*-Jimmy Johnson*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have helped me on the long journey to complete this research. I would like to thank my mom for pushing me to continue my education and always challenge myself, to my husband for always having my back during this process, and to my two girls for being patient with their busy mom. I would also like to thank everyone from the University of North Dakota for their support and encouragement, especially my advisor Dr. Deborah Worley. Finally, I thank God for making all things possible and for lighting my path in scholarship and life.

## ABSTRACT

Given the recent surge of interest in educational leadership development in Saudi Arabia, a qualitative study was undertaken to evaluate the perspectives of participants in one intensive leadership training program called the Saudi Oxford Program for Educational Leaders (SOPEL). Using interview data with SOPEL participants and an analysis of their final projects, a holistic understanding of the participants' experiences emerged. Findings included a confusion/conflation of concepts of leadership and management; a desire for more responsiveness and sensitivity to feedback on the part of the participants; logistical, linguistic, and administrative hurdles; quality control concerns; and a need to evaluate programs' effectiveness independently. An exploratory qualitative study model called the HORSE framework provides clarification of participants' experiences as well as recommendations for future educational leadership training initiatives.

## **CHAPTER I: Introduction**

Mohammed and Sara are both administrators who work in public colleges in Saudi Arabia. They teach courses in a four-year degree program that is sponsored and designed by the government of Saudi Arabia, much like public colleges in the US. They were invited to participate in the Saudi Oxford Program for Educational Leadership (also called the SOPEL program) in 2010. This program allowed them to travel to the University of Oxford in England for two weeks of intensive educational leadership training and workshops with Oxford staff. The Saudi government fully sponsored their participation in the program. After completing their time in the UK, they both spent the next five months designing a project that applied what they had learned from their experience abroad to their careers or job responsibilities.

Since King Abdullah ascended to the throne in 2005, he has made an enormous investment in fostering the education of Saudi Arabia's people. The Saudi administration has merged a humanitarian interest in developing human capital with its goal of increasing the country's competitive economic potential and independence from oil (Ministry of Higher Education, n.d.). This has resulted in a flood of programs designed to develop effective educational institutions and leadership—SOPEL among them—under the umbrella of what is called the

Tatweer Project. These programs are fully sponsored by a massive 9-billion-riyal (USD 2.3 billion) government investment (Alkinani, 2008). The majority of the other programs are local, but SOPEL is unique for its international, collaborative nature.

SOPEL has received positive feedback from its participants and from those who orchestrated the program. However, it is unknown what each SOPEL participant individually took away from his or her experience and how he or she perceived the effectiveness of the program. This study attempted to provide an analysis of participant perspectives of the SOPEL program and its effectiveness in helping its participants improve their job performance and their professional contributions to the Saudi educational system. Moreover, the SOPEL program is unique in its approach of not only attempting to develop the capacity of educational leaders, but also because it provided exposure to the outside Western world and its educational environment for Saudi educational leaders (males and females). This can have significant long-term implications for Saudi educational policies. The rarity, novelty, and the potential long-term implications of the SOPEL program warranted its in-depth study by this dissertation research.

### **SOPEL: The Saudi Oxford Program for Educational Leaders**

The focus of this study, the Saudi Oxford Program for Educational Leaders (SOPEL), is one of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's most recent attempts to enhance educational administration and professional development. The goals of the one-time SOPEL program for both male and female educational leaders, as stated on the program's website, were to promote many facets of leadership development, from modernization to economic improvement to international cooperation (Ministry of Education, Tatweer, 2010). The program operated under a national educational philosophy that supported academic dialogue, individual growth, and creative, dynamic leadership. SOPEL participants' professional backgrounds covered a wide range of educational and administrative fields, from classroom teaching to organizational management.

The structure of the SOPEL program consisted of three stages/steps. These stages lasted a total of one week each and featured an intense schedule of workshops, individual coaching, events, school visits, and self-evaluation (Ministry of Education, Tatweer, 2010). During this time, 40 selected participants (20 male and 20 female) also attended conferences and workshops and began to brainstorm ideas for their final professional projects. The first two steps were undertaken at the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom. The first week of

the program involved general training, and then, during the second-week, participants began drafting their ideas for their projects and receiving customized training. The third stage of the SOPEL program took place over five months in Saudi Arabia (Ministry of Education, Tatweer, 2010).

While participants returned to their normal jobs, they continued to work on a final project specifically tailored to their professional situations by proposing a new educational reform/intervention or policy. Final projects were expected to include commitments of participants providing training to their colleagues, passing on skills to other members of the participants' workplace environments, and contributing positively to the development of the educational system in Saudi Arabia (Ministry of Education, Tatweer, 2010). At the end of the five-month period, each participant presented his or her project to the program staff in return for a certificate of completion from the University of Oxford. Examples of final project topics included digital literacy, community building, training and empowerment, encouraging academic dialogue, and improving the administration of private education (Ministry of Education, Tatweer, 2010).

### **SOPEL in the Broader Saudi Educational Context**

The Ministry of Education has a few priorities which are common knowledge in Saudi Arabia. First, the need to evolve economically beyond the

lifespan of the country's oil reserves is a definite impetus to building leadership. Second, the recent changes in regime combined with regional conflicts have created a general culture of "tightening the belt" on government spending and made it even more important for programs to prove their efficacy. Third, Saudi Arabia's delicate diplomatic role as a major trading partner with many powerful nations makes it necessary for the country to train strong leaders who will maintain its public role and keep order. Finally, Saudi Arabia's desire to be a powerful global leader in business, education, and politics requires that it be judicious about the programs it chooses to fund and support.

Perhaps nowhere is this agenda more evident than in the Saudi 2030 Vision, a comprehensive set of reforms including many changes to educational policy. The goal of the Saudi 2030 Vision is to restructure the economy and the government's financial policies to prepare the country for life beyond oil. Khatoun and Kronfol (2016) explain that the Vision aims at diversifying the economy, creating jobs for nationals in the private sector, and implementing a gradual but sizable and sustained fiscal consolidation to reach a balanced budget. The Vision also makes other claims which are harder to quantify: eliminating corruption, ensuring transparency in government spending, and creating countless jobs to feed the growing workforce. The main themes of the program, according



to Callen, Ltaifa, Shbaikat, and Miyajima (2016), are as follows: (i) prioritization, sequencing, and implementation of the reforms; (ii) growth and employment in a low-oil price environment; (iii) fiscal adjustment, reforms, and financing; and (iv) maintaining external and financial sector stability (p. 19). In the world of education, this initiative means that curriculum modernization and a greater focus on training teachers and measuring performance will be at the top of the agenda for Saudi schools (Callen et al., 2016, p. 20). The Saudi Vision 2030 embodies the Saudi government's cognizance of the severity of the next turn of its economic wheel and its commitment to sustaining a high quality of life for its people by preparing adequately for these changes.

The educational initiatives of the Tatweer Project, developed to implement Vision 2030, involve full sponsorships for their participants. The King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Project for Public Education Development (Tatweer Project) was established in 2007 with the objective of focusing on K-12 schools and their development under the philosophy that K-12 education is the foundation and unit of educational infrastructure. Fifty secondary schools were set up (Smart School), 25 each for boys and girls, under this Project (Alyami, 2014). The SOPEL program was organized under the umbrella of Tatweer, as a groundbreaking initiative for the implementation of Vision 2030's directives, as a means of

national educational transformation. Programs such as SOPEL are the instruments or tools for achieving the goals of Vision 2030 (Ministry of Education, n.d.). By focusing significant increased resources on education and professional development of the Saudi people, Vision 2030 has invested in its greatest and most valuable asset: human capital.

### **Statement of the Problem**

With the coming of the King Abdullah Project and the massive investment in Saudi education, many new proposals have been offered and accepted for new programs to improve education. However, while there is a great deal of forward momentum directed at creating and building new programs, there are few initiatives designed to reflect or follow up on these programs. Thus, it is challenging to assess how participants in these programs are impacted by their experiences.

These new initiatives in education have shifted the priority of educational institutions away from training administrators in management and have steered them more in the direction of training leaders. As Kotter (2008) explains, leaders differ from managers in that they produce “movement and energy,” while managers produce “consistency and order” (p. 5). Saudi Arabia has a centralized educational power structure and an abundance of skilled managers, but displaying

the traits of leadership (as described by Kotter) is both culturally and organizationally discouraged. Mathis (2007) and Alfrayan (2014) both describe the collectivist nature of Saudi society and its inhibiting impact on dynamic, risk-taking forms of leadership. Managerial skills such as organization, planning, and problem-solving are culturally rewarded, while leadership behaviors like changing paradigms and experimenting with new strategies are considered disruptive and not always appreciated (Alfrayan, 2014). Furthermore, Saudi beliefs about leadership are informed by religious values, including the importance of leaders as servants of God and the constant quest for self-improvement (Marbun, 2013). This creates a complex equation when attempting to “fit” Western theories of leadership to Saudi circumstances — an equation which the current literature has largely ignored.

The literature on the topic of accountability in Saudi educational programs is thin. An increasing effort on behalf of the Saudi government for candor and transparency demonstrates a growing commitment to high academic and professional standards. However, this transition is a slow and arduous one. This study assessed the perceptions and experiences of SOPEL participants by giving them an opportunity for discussion where they provided feedback about the program and reflected on how it shaped their professional development.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of the participants of the SOPEL program for educational leaders. The study explored participant perspectives on the long-term effects and impacts of the program. This study involved the use of a qualitative methodology.

### **Research Questions**

There are several important research questions pertaining to this study:

1. How do the participants in the SOPEL program perceive the effectiveness of the program in helping them improve their job performance?
2. What are the professional applications of the knowledge and skills acquired through attending the SOPEL program, as experienced by participants? Are they commensurate with the program's intentions?
3. How would the SOPEL participants describe the long-term impacts and effects of their experiences in the program?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The main goal of the SOPEL program was to provide participants with exposure to excellent leadership practices and to inspire them to apply their knowledge back home in their chosen fields. This is part of a larger professional development trend which has become popular in Saudi Arabia as well as in other

countries (Bowe & Bauer, 2007). The trend involves increased funding and support for innovative programs, improving the country's skilled workforce and building a prestigious educational reputation. However, the proposed leadership practices of educators and administrators are mediated and moderated by many different variables.

Leithwood and Levin (2005) developed a conceptual framework for interpreting these many variables and for understanding their relationships with one another. Although the term 'variable' is more closely tied to quantitative research, the idea of a variable can also have profound qualitative significance. Variables can be any forces or factors that affect how people interact, work, and perceive one another, and our perceptions of certain variables shape our understanding and discussion of our world.

The authors divide variables into five categories: antecedent, independent, dependent, mediating, and moderating. Antecedents, which include both the external culture and climate in which the study takes place and the subject's internal beliefs and assumptions, set the stage for the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of leadership practices. For this study, antecedents included the participants' cultural backgrounds, the professional environments from which they come, and their personal beliefs about leadership. The practices themselves are referred to as independent variables, and their long-term and short-term

effectiveness (the dependent variables) are affected by mediating and moderating variables. Independent variables in this study included the content of the classes and workshops comprising the SOPEL program, as well as the participants' leadership practices as they were *before* the program. Mediating variables, such as the organizational climate and working/learning conditions in which a leader works, can enhance or detract from the effectiveness of their leadership practices. Moderating variables, such as the leader's or student's family background, gender, and the reward structure of the institution, can also color these relationships (Leithwood & Levin, 2005). The mediating, moderating, and dependent variables emerged from qualitative analysis of the open-ended interview data collected. Because a qualitative research design was chosen for this study, variables and their categories developed from a detailed analysis of the participants' qualitative responses.

This conceptual framework was used to interpret the responses of SOPEL participants when they discussed their impressions and experiences in the program. This framework has been used by Tymensen (2006), Allsopp (2011) and Lowrey (2013) to evaluate leadership programs' effects in Canada, and variations on this framework have been incorporated into the research of Wallace (2006) in evaluating the impacts of leadership programs in the United States. Not only did this framework allow me to identify factors that contributed to

participants' experiences in the SOPEL program, but it also allowed me to identify each participant's unique professional environment.

### **Importance of the Study**

One of the main concerns that Saudi Arabia has faced in the 21st century is the limited future revenue of crude oil (Bottery, 2014). Much of Saudi Arabia's wealth has come from the sale of oil as fuel, but it is a limited resource (Bottery, 2014). In an attempt to create a more sustainable future, King Abdullah developed a massive educational reform program to advance the capacity of Saudi people to learn new skills and to cultivate new industries (Onsman, 2010). The King was directly responsible for a multi-billion-riyal endowment that enabled the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) and other universities to implement dozens of programs across different content areas (Clary & Karlin, 2011). These programs need to be analyzed from participants' perspectives, not just by cost-effectiveness or attendance.

Enhancing school programs throughout the Kingdom is an essential part of educational reform. One of these initiatives, the Tatweer Project, involves cultivating better leadership within the educational system to help create more skilled educators (Maroun, Samman, Moujaes, & Abouchakra, 2008). To make the transition from being dependent on oil resources to having a knowledge-based

economy and an oil-independent society, Saudi Arabia needs to increase its human capital through education and professional development (Corneo, 2011).

A major part of the educational restructuring that occurred under King Abdullah aims to better "...align Saudi graduates with national and international labour markets" (Onsman, 2011, p. 529). This involves international collaborations exactly like the SOPEL program. However, despite the SOPEL program's positive reviews and appearance, there is no independent body to analyze the experiences of participants (Alkinani, 2008). Currently, the best way to obtain information about the SOPEL program is to consult those who participated in the program directly. While self-reported and perception-based data are always somewhat biased, this is the most accurate way to obtain data about the perceived effectiveness of the SOPEL program and will be instrumental in helping the Ministries of Education determine the best direction for future programs.

This study is beneficial in its contributions to Saudi academic discourse, in its ability to generate helpful critique, and in the demonstration of best practices for future leadership programs. The participants in the SOPEL program may benefit personally from the opportunity to discuss their experiences outside the context of their professional projects. The facilitation of an objective and



constructive discussion about the program will empower participants to speak freely and openly about their experiences. Meeting IRB standards, protecting participants' privacy through anonymization, and implementing rigorous data protection strategies will allow the study to be as objective as possible. The study also helps participants, after the program is complete, to judge their success over time by using their feedback to gauge their progress as educators. For individuals who are currently teaching in Saudi Arabia or for those who work in administrative positions such as the Ministry of Education, the findings of the study may guide their leadership practices. The conclusions are also useful to institutional and government sponsors of similar programs to determine whether to continue to invest in such opportunities in the future.

There are many benefits that the publication of this study brings to society in general. Those who do not have access to programs such as SOPEL can take advantage of any material that may be beneficial without participating directly. They can update their knowledge and broaden their understanding of good practices for leadership simply by examining the study's findings. Being exposed to new models of leadership allows other professionals to become more effective leaders. Also, evaluating the perceptions of SOPEL participants serves as a good barometer when other global educational leaders are contemplating the promotion

or establishment of similar programs. If other countries are considering educational expansion, it is important that they make efficient and strategic choices about which programs to support, and this study can help them to make that choice.

The academic and research community certainly benefits from this study, which adds to the currently thin amount of research on this topic (see Chapter 2). The academic field of educational leadership in Saudi Arabia is still very new, and any additional research in this area is always helpful to build a solid foundation for the country's success. The fact that so little research exists to reflect on Saudi Arabia's current leadership development programs means that a great deal of time and government funding is being spent without compelling evidence that it will contribute to the country's success.

### **Scope of the Study**

This study involved qualitative research methods. There were 40 eligible individuals from the SOPEL project who were available for selection for the study; ten of those individuals chose to participate in this research project. Also, many official documents describe and explain the procedures of various other leadership initiatives in Saudi Arabia. I limited my external sources of data to official government documents regarding SOPEL and media sources that covered

the event itself, not the entire scope of the Tatweer Project, which would be too large a volume of data and which would contain too much information not relevant to this study.

The subjects who participated in the data collection originated from a variety of backgrounds in educational leadership. All participants work in some capacity for the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia, but their positions cover a wide range of fields: testing administration, English language training, interfacing foreign and private schools, admissions and finance, development, and special and gifted education (Alkinani, 2008). This diversity of perspectives, while presenting an analytical challenge, offered a broad and holistic opportunity for insight.

### **Definition of Terms**

This section provides a brief glossary explaining some of the terminology that is frequently utilized throughout this discussion.

**Leadership:** For this study, Kotter's (2008) definition of leadership was used, as set against a definition of management. In Kotter's (2008) estimation, leadership is based on creating "constructive and adaptive change" and dynamic new direction for an organization (p. 5). Leadership duties outlined by Kotter (2008) include crafting a long-term vision for an organization, aligning people for a

common goal, and motivating and inspiring others (p. 5). **Management:**

According to Kotter, management is concerned with maintaining order and consistency in a professional environment. Management differs greatly from leadership, but the two roles are not mutually exclusive (Kotter, 2008). The duties of successful managers include planning and budgeting, organizing staff, monitoring and problem-solving (Kotter, 2008, p. 4). Kotter (2008) believes that there are too many managers in modern organizations and not enough who perform the duties of leadership — this statement is applicable in the Saudi context, as is explained in more detail in Chapter 2.

**SOPEL: Saudi Oxford Program for Educational Leadership:** This program is the focus of the study. It is a three-tiered professional development program designed to provide Saudi educational leaders with expertise from Oxford's prestigious authorities (Johri, 2010).

### **Researcher Positionality**

As a lifelong citizen of Saudi Arabia with professional experience teaching in the Saudi system at both the K-12 and higher education levels, my experience has enabled me to study the SOPEL program effectively. My extensive background knowledge of the Saudi system and culture in general allowed me to interpret the SOPEL participants' perspectives appropriately and

accurately. I also had access to a great deal of supplemental information on the subject of professional educational development, and I used my professional connections with Saudi educators and administrators to facilitate my work. My experience and identity allowed me to make the participants more comfortable and to make a more nuanced interpretation of their responses. However, because I am so familiar with the system, there is a possibility that I may not have noticed some items of importance or that I may have taken certain things for granted since I do not have the “blank slate” that an outsider would bring to this project.

Objectivity is essential to any research endeavor, and I used a variety of techniques to maintain an objective and impartial stance. I made use of an outside consultant in the field to provide an alternate perspective and to assist in my accountability. This consultant—a dean and a professor at a Saudi university—shares my cultural knowledge but also has many years of academic study experience. His involvement was approved by the Institutional Review Board. During the data collection phase of the study, I planned to share the transcripts of participants’ interviews with the interviewee to give the participants an opportunity to add supplementary comments that would aid in my interpretation. My goal in doing so was to allow me to temper my impressions with the actual participants’ voices. However, the participants whom I interviewed had no further comments or requested changes to their transcripts. After the defense of

this project is complete, the study will be submitted to the Saudi Cultural Mission for review. This will ensure that my work is consistent with the Mission's values and that it meets their standards for publication, both in accuracy and objectivity.

The Saudi Cultural Mission is responsible for accrediting the work of Saudi scholars who study abroad and will receive and review my final dissertation before it is published in Saudi Arabia. While I will require the approval of the Cultural Mission to have my degree processed for employment or further study in the Gulf countries, I am free to share and publish my work outside of the Gulf without the approval of the Cultural Mission. I do not expect to have problems with the Cultural Mission regarding the content or tone of my study, no matter how positive or negative the participants' feedback may be. The Mission's approval is foremost a formality and is only necessary within the Gulf region.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter 1 presents an explanation of the problem, details on the purpose, scope, and content of the study, and definitions of important vocabulary used throughout the study.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of relevant literature both on the current state of education and leadership development in Saudi Arabia and the implementation of leadership development programs around the world.

Chapter 3 enumerates the research methods the study will utilize, as well as addressing concerns for reliability, validity, and ethical integrity of the research procedures.

Chapter 4 presents the qualitative evidence gathered from the SOPEL participants in the form of interviews and an analysis of participants' final projects as well as the researcher's field notes.

Chapter 5 discusses my interpretation of the research findings of the qualitative interviews and participants' final projects. This analysis culminates in an exploratory qualitative study based on the data collected. This chapter concludes with recommendations for policymakers and educational administrators in Saudi Arabia.

## **CHAPTER II: Literature Review**

Saudi Arabia has become acutely aware of its economic dependence on oil, a non-renewable resource, and has realized that education is the best way to prevent economic collapse when oil reserves are depleted (Bottery, 2014). Saudi social and economic priorities are being redefined by the country's administration to create a viable education strategy to protect the country's assets and future (Maroun et al., 2008). To meet the rising populations of students, both in Saudi Arabia and beyond, Mathis (2007) says, "The need for educational leaders is urgent and worldwide" (p. 18). This literature review focuses on the educational reforms that are currently in progress in Saudi Arabia and the ways in which educational leadership is being developed and discussed within the country.

This review is based on three different dimensions of the discourse on educational leadership in Saudi Arabia. The first dimension explains the historical and religious background of education and leadership in Saudi Arabia, the influence of Islam, and the long-term effects of culture on the education system. Islamic beliefs about education, leadership, and society offer insight into the Saudi educational structure, but culture also plays an important role (Shah, 2010).



The second dimension of the review discusses the shifts in national values and priorities that have occurred since King Abdullah's reign began in 2005. This includes compromises made to traditional values and practices in favor of creating "...an operating model for the education sector, in which operating entities, good governance, and funding allow for the sustainability of education goals" (Maroun et al., 2008, p. 1). Improved educational opportunities for women, changing definitions of leadership, and increased international collaboration are all reflections of this change (Neva, 2011).

The third part of the review takes a close look at examples of educational leadership in practice in Saudi Arabia. Programs and initiatives in Saudi Arabia are compared with those of neighboring or culturally-similar countries, and these practices are analyzed for effectiveness. Smith (2013) criticizes the current literature of evaluation of Saudi educational leadership, saying that evaluations are too "nebulous" and raise more questions than they answer. Gaps in the literature are revealed through the distinct lack of objective, in-depth analysis of educational leadership program effectiveness.

### **Background, Religion, Culture, and Traditional Definitions of Leadership**

Although the education system in Saudi Arabia is not entirely controlled by religion, many of the underlying beliefs informing the educational structure are

rooted in the national faith of Islam. The Holy Quran emphasizes teaching and learning as “sacred duties of the highest order” (Shah, 2006, p. 366) and describes the process of education as one of continuous self-improvement (p. 365). With God as a supreme teacher, teachers and educational leaders are given the responsibility of sharing the supreme spiritual gift of knowledge with the world, similar to the sacred duties of the prophet (Shah, 2006). The goals of education, according to the Quran, are “moving towards righteousness” and “becoming a useful member of society” (Shah, 2006, p. 367). In the scripture, these goals and responsibilities are given to both men and women. Shah (2010) explains that in most Muslim countries, Islam is “inextricably linked with identity, though not the dominating force” (p. 40). The development of educational infrastructure within a Muslim country “must be value-based and faith-conscious, even if individual leaders are not” (Shah, 2006, p. 378). This, along with the country’s drive for self-sufficiency, explains why very few people of Western origin are hired at high-level leadership positions in Saudi Arabia (Smith, 2013).

Early forms of education in Saudi Arabia, similar to their counterparts around the world, had derived from religion, as well. Education took its first institutional form in Saudi as *alkuttab*, a faith-centered general education system conducted in mosques and offering programming for children and adults alike. Similar institutions were known as *maddaras* (Shah, 2006). Within the *alkuttab*,

students learned literacy, basic math and science, proper social behaviors and the principles of the faith (Alfrayan, 2014). This form of education faded into obsolescence with the establishment of universal public education, but many of its core characteristics—gender-segregated classrooms, the teaching of Holy Scripture and faith-based social customs—have remained in modern schooling in Saudi Arabia. One of the most prominent features that have endured is the separate set of standards for male and female students, teachers, and educational leaders.

Although foreigners often assume standards are the same, education for women in Saudi Arabia provides an insightful glimpse of the intersection of religion and culture. Following in the historical footsteps of the *alkuttab*, the original principle of female education in institutions was “to make women good wives and mothers, and to prepare them for ‘acceptable’ jobs such as teaching and nursing that were believed to suit their nature” (Neva, 2011, p. 2). Because of the gendered separation of schools, the emergence of “‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ flavors of leadership” also contributed to different expectations of men and women in education (Shah, 2010, p. 31). These gender-based differences will be discussed later in this review. However, it should be noted that the Holy Quran speaks openly of several different types of equality for men and women — financial, educational, and otherwise (Shah, 2010). Leadership values promoted

by the Holy Quran, which are essential in Saudi Arabia regardless of gender, include “social justice, humanity, respect, and sharp distinction between right and wrong” (Shah, 2006, p. 376). These qualities make up the essential Saudi conception of leadership and are reflected in the current organization and structure of Saudi Arabia’s educational system.

### **“Regimes of Truth” in the Saudi Educational System**

Saudi Arabia’s current school system has undergone many changes in the past decades, but several core elements remain mostly untouched. This section of the literature review will attempt to uncover some of the prevailing assumptions and beliefs, or “regimes of truth,” as described by Foucault (Shah & Shah, 2012). Saudi Arabia is considered a collectivist society like many of its Arab neighbors (Thomas, 2007). In collectivist societies, the needs of a group and society as a whole are given higher priority than the needs and freedoms of individuals (Alfrayan, 2014). Education in collectivist societies reflects an orientation towards memorization and re-enactment of successful behaviors and theories rather than the critical thinking and analysis that is prioritized in more individualized societies (Hussain, 2013). Saudi schools have followed this paradigm until very recently, using a curriculum handed down from the Ministry of Education and following an educational policy which discourages digression

from said curriculum (Thomas, 2007). Other elements of Saudi educational culture include strong uncertainty avoidance (willingness to break the rules and take risks), high respect for tradition, and high power distance, meaning that supervisors are often distant or difficult to engage with on a personal level (Hussain, 2013). Resistance to new ideas (most likely in conflict with Saudi people's respect for tradition) has been a constant source of friction during the process of educational reform (Thomas, 2007).

At the time of the SOPEL program, Saudi Arabian education was controlled centrally by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education, which were responsible for all curricula, teacher standards, laws, and any other education-related matters. These ministries have since been combined in the recent change of regime, but their purposes (and issues) remain mostly the same. Across the entire field of literature on Saudi educational leadership, one continuing complaint of educators is the restrictions of government and bureaucratic authority (Mathis, 2007). The domination of the administrative sector over the academic sector is a well-known problem for those wishing to push innovation in Saudi Arabia (Thomas, 2007). Despite these structural barriers, recent projects in enhancing leadership through professional development opportunities have been numerous. Teachers consistently report feeling a lack of representation in the design of programs that are meant to serve

them — many educators even report that they are forbidden to attend professional development workshops because their supervisors cannot cover their absences (Ghonem Sywelem & Witte, 2013). However, even the Holy Quran states that professional development (of a religious scholar or a regular educator) requires withdrawing from one's normal environment and reflecting on one's practices (Shah, 2006). Efforts at increasing the autonomy of Saudi schools and universities are building, but progress is slow and hindered by bureaucratic barriers and recent regime changes.

One of the greatest distinctions that has emerged as Western leadership theories diffuse into Saudi Arabia has been the difference in Saudi perceptions of leadership. The literature consistently agrees that Saudi Arabia, at least until the recent educational restructuring, has always trained administrators and educators to be managers, not leaders (Mathis, 2007). According to this manner of thought, leadership and management are two very different sets of responsibilities, though they are often thrust upon the same person under the guise of a single position. Leadership behaviors are risk-taking, innovative, and dynamic, while managers' duties center more on maintaining the stability and functionality of an organization (Ghonem Sywelem & Witte, 2013). For one person to do both of these at the same time is nearly impossible. When taking into account the cultural values (high uncertainty avoidance, respect for tradition, and extensive

bureaucracy) that hinder Kotter's (2008) leadership behaviors from being practiced, it is easy to see why the managerial approach to educational leadership is favored (Ghonem Sywelem & Witte, 2013). Saudi administrators have become very skilled at what Kotter (2008) describes as managerial behaviors: planning, budgeting, controlling, and generally maintaining order and consistency. However, the behaviors that Kotter (2008) associates with leadership (taking risks, experimenting, and questioning existing paradigms) are culturally frowned upon for most administrators in Saudi Arabia due to the centralized nature of most systems of infrastructure in the country.

Not surprisingly, leadership training in Saudi Arabia has typically taken place in a pre-service context, before teachers or administrators are placed in their positions. Saudi graduates have criticized this pre-service orientation and the lack of mentoring programs in their schools, claiming they are insufficient to prepare them for work experience, especially in the areas of classroom technology, parent communication, and classroom management (Ghonem Sywelem & Witte). Other peripheral problems in the education system include limited freedom of information, administrative inefficiency, and the pseudo-corruption that arises from any endeavor as large-scale and costly as the current educational restructuring in the country (Aljodea, 2012).

It is important to keep in mind that Saudi Arabia's vast economic dependence on crude oil has both informed the current educational structure and contributed to the need for more progressive educational leadership development. Bottery (2014) explains the connections between the depletion of natural oil reserves and the need for educational leadership, detailing seven new sources of conflict that only improved education can mediate. While all seven of these problems are relevant in Bottery's native context of the United States, not all of them translate directly to the Saudi educational environment. The most important of these seven factors to Saudi educators is Bottery's projected increase in the IT-based nature of education and the difficulties of teaching in an increasingly violent world. IT-based education is likely to increase in Saudi Arabia as well as around the world — Saudi Arabia has already begun more diversified and rigorous online programs in collaboration with other universities in the Arab and the Western world (Smith, 2013). As for the possibility of violence in the face of depleted oil, Saudi Arabia is taking great care to promote economic self-sufficiency for the country, as well as nurturing partnerships with many nations that focus on educational and diplomatic ties rather than oil-reliant economic ones (Smith, 2013).

It is clear from the literature that the Saudi definition of leadership is not always congruent with the Western, individualistic models that have come to be



taken for granted as the norm. To understand Saudi models and conceptions of leadership in education, it is necessary to look at the religious roots, cultural trends, and historical evolutions of the economic system that have taken place. However, at the core, leadership in Saudi educational institutions aspires to many of the same qualities as Western models — very similar to Freire’s concept of “servant leadership” (Shah, 2006, p. 373). Recent efforts by the Ministry of Education to accept more of Kotter's leadership behaviors, as opposed to mere management, have been widespread. This is an attempt to respond to both the demands of educators for more explicit expectations and the increasing need for a competitive, self-sufficient economic system that does not rely solely on oil (Leggio, 2013). In the next section of this review, the educational development initiatives that have exploded within Saudi Arabia will be analyzed, with special attention given to how Western institutions and ideals about leadership are being assimilated—or not—into Saudi educational initiatives (Thomas, 2007).

### **Goals for the Future, Compromises, and Changes in Educational**

#### **Restructuring**

Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Education, the governing body of universities and colleges in the country, describes the country’s educational revolution in three stages. The first stage of developing education was to raise awareness among the

population of the importance of education, particularly equal education for both sexes, and literacy for everyone. In the second, the spread of literacy and basic universal education was necessary, as was the building of an educational infrastructure to facilitate the country's goals. The final stage, which is still currently underway, is that of enriching and deepening educational programs so that they meet the country's needs and also allow competition with other developed nations (King Abdullah Project, 2011). Now that Saudi Arabia boasts an almost 100% literacy rate, the country and the government institutions that finance and support it can move on to more complex initiatives (King Abdullah Project, 2011). Many of these initiatives are discussed in the previous parts of this proposal: economic diversification, higher education, and academic competition. In this section, the main programs that have been responsible for the educational revolution will be analyzed.

By far the most extensive and most involved educational initiative in Saudi Arabia is known as the King Abdullah Project (KAP), named after the most recent king who made education such a national priority. The KAP began in 2005, valued at \$3.1 billion (Smith, 2013), and in less than a decade has spawned dozens of new projects, built new campuses, re-written curricula, and opened the doors of education to students from all walks of life (King Abdullah Project, 2011). The program has involved "drastic reforms to the country's education

system” with the ultimate goal of competing academically with Western countries (King Abdullah Project, 2011). With a student population of nearly five million, one-sixth of the national population is directly affected by the Project (Sakr, 2008). Because of the massive scale of the KAP, its goals, such as “leaping ahead to the 21st Century” (Hussain, 2013) and “meeting the religious, social, and economic needs,” (Mathis, 2007) may seem nebulous, but the individual branches of the program often meet particular needs.

The primary objective of the King Abdullah Project has been to guarantee the country’s continued economic prosperity after oil dries up. This is described by Saudi academics as “modernizing” the education system and “prepar[ing] citizens for life and work and modern global economy” (Mathis, 2007, p. 2). With an additional 2.5 million people expected to enter the Saudi labor force in the next five years, the need for education, professional development, and private-sector leadership is proliferating (Neva, 2011). Furthermore, although the King Abdullah Project has brought in a great deal of academic and professional talent from abroad to train Saudi students and workers, the ultimate goal of self-sufficiency remains (Smith, 2013). The importance of using indigenous researchers, leaders, and scholars with the social, cultural, and religious advantages of native citizens cannot be overemphasized (Thomas, 2007).

The King Abdullah Project has given special credence to the development of effective academic leadership by establishing the Academic Leadership Center (ALC), a national organization that provides professional development and networking opportunities for leaders in educational institutions. Researchers have cited two main systematic weaknesses in the Saudi educational system before the KAP: lack of interdependence between universities and society and lack of faculty participation in enrichment and training opportunities (Aljodea, 2012). The ALC attempts to mitigate both of these problems at once. The official mission statement of the ALC includes five goals: fostering innovation, offering programs and services, diagnosing systematic problems, facilitating leadership development, and evolving to meet stakeholder needs (Al-Ankari, 2011). However, these goals have been criticized by Smith for being “too nebulous” (Smith, 2013, p. 45). European scholar and expert on Saudi education, Larry Smith, reacts to this vague proposal with some important questions: “What leadership paradigm[s] will be promoted? What qualifications will be sought [for staff]? How will the effectiveness of the centre and its programs be evaluated?” (Smith, 2013, p. 6). A closer look at the ALC website, which has been updated numerous times since the publication of Smith’s book, reveals the ALC has, in fact, been busy.

The Academic Leadership Center publishes a biannual newsletter detailing their progress and featuring guest articles, typically from foreign professionals and professors. According to these newsletters, the ALC put on 64 workshops in its first five years of operation, collaborated with international educational organizations, and facilitated the development of a discourse of educational leadership in Saudi Arabia (Al-Ankari, 2011). Rather than enforcing laws or auditing universities, the ALC concerns itself more with developing resources for leaders and encouraging networking and interdependence (Al-Ankari, 2011). This may seem like a trivial duty, but the discourse on leadership in Saudi Arabia is still an emerging field. Even the Central Department of Statistics and Information publishes data on dozens of other academic fields and gives specific statistics about students at all levels, reports nothing about leadership programs, preferring instead to subsume them under other labels (Al-Ankari, 2012). The ALC is an important stepping stone in the process of developing educational leadership in the country — although it is still in development. Currently, the ALC guest writers are all non-Saudi, and recommended reading titles such as Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* more closely resemble self-help titles than academically rigorous publications (Al-Ankari, 2012). However, there is hope that the standards of the ALC and Saudi educational leadership will continue to rise to meet international standards.

It is difficult to imagine carrying out a program as vast in scope and as sophisticated in implementation as the King Abdullah Project. Such a program would be nearly impossible to implement in the United States, with the confusion of state and federal jurisdictions, the lack of central funding, and the likelihood of popular disapproval of such a centralized and authoritarian style of management. However, Saudi Arabia has unique advantages in conducting large-scale reforms. Because Saudi Arabia has a strong central government and because education is centrally controlled as well, implementing national educational initiatives is relatively streamlined and can use the country's existing power infrastructure (Smith, 2013). Also, the availability of large sums of state funding makes the possibility of executing programs much more attainable. However, the Ministry of Education was not tasked solely with carrying out such a vast and varied array of programs under the KAP. Instead, the responsibility was divided between government organizations like the Ministry of Education (MOE) and a publicly owned, private-sector-style company known as Tatweer.

Tatweer, or the Tatweer Holdings Company, acts as the King Abdullah Project's hands and feet, taking responsibility for constructing schools, developing new curricula, and implementing training programs as well as extracurricular activity development (Mathis, 2007). The program's prestige stems from its mandate by the King himself (Hussain, 2013). In the first phase of

Tatweer for K-12 education, 50 Smart, self-evaluating and self-learning schools – 25 each for boys and girls – were established across 25 provinces of KSA with activated educational leaders and qualified teachers. In the second phase, these Smart schools evaluated themselves, identified lessons learned and best practices, and made modifications based on the principles of: (1) Excellence for all, (2) Commitment from everyone, (3) Accountability for all, (4) Professionalism from everyone, and (5) Transparency and clarity by everyone (Alyami, 2014).

Tatweer surpasses the obstacles of politics and administrative hesitation which have plagued the Saudi education system by using its governmental authority to ensure cooperation (Aljodea, 2012). Tatweer is run in the style of a private corporation, but it is technically owned by the government, marking an increasing trend of Saudi educational institutions that resemble businesses (Aljodea, 2012). Whether this idea came from the West or was simply a product of innovation and progress is debatable, but Tatweer has undoubtedly supported initiatives toward international collaboration, study abroad, and international development (Mathis, 2007). Tatweer has offered opportunities for the Saudi educational system to break free of some of its stereotypical patterns: increasing the prestige of in-service rather than pre-service training, improving educator agency and empowerment, and increasing the amount of input that educators have in administrative design and decision-making (Ghonem Sywelem & Witte, 2013).

Tatweer is the agent of the King Abdullah Project, putting its lofty and sometimes nebulous goals into practice in the educational institutions of the country and incorporating wisdom and knowledge from both within the country and from the many sources abroad which have been tapped by the KAP.

Saudi Arabia has historically been an insular society, active in relationships with its neighbors but not seeking approval from Europe and the United States. Vast cultural differences, historical independence, and a general economic and societal self-sufficiency have contributed to the lack of enthusiasm for absorbing foreign ideas within the country. However, the increasing urgency of the economic shift away from oil has spurred an unprecedented level of interest in absorbing educational and leadership strategies from abroad. These adaptations have been numerous but are always tempered with a desire to honor Saudi culture, religion, and educational traditions.

Since educational leadership became a serious topic in its own right, divided from other fields, the discourse on the subject has been traditionally dominated by scholars from the developed West: Europe, America, and occasionally Canada and Australia. These nations share a colonial legacy and a set of cultural and educational values that have dominated many fields of discussion in academia. However, in an increasingly global society, the value of one-size-fits-all styles of leadership and education is rapidly diminishing.



Hallinger and Leithwood (1998) questioned this monochromatic approach to educational theory, especially in societies in Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. They suggested that most ideas about leadership from the first set of countries (often referred to as the West, though that term is problematic) are based on cultural values that do not “fit” when applied to non-Western societies (Mathis, 2007, p. 129).

Saudi Arabia is a perfect example of how these Western leadership values are a poor fit for non-Western cultures. Hallinger and Leithwood’s (1998) list of leadership values that are prized in the West draw a strict contrast to Saudi leadership and educational values. Among them, qualities such as adaptability, empowering others, risk taking, and innovation are very discordant with the traditional values of Saudi education, whose religious and cultural basis is discussed earlier in this chapter (Mathis, 2007). Saudi traditional education values, such as centralized power, respect for tradition, religious education, and the separation of genders, do not match at all with the Western list. Research shows that the bias against Anglo-American ideas in education is stronger in Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia than in any other part of the world (Thomas, 2007). Further, a study by Hussain (2013) indicated that Saudi students, in general, prefer the traditional teacher-directed approach to education that is the

“natural outcome of a collectivist society,” despite the weakness of such programs’ training in critical thinking skills (p. 69).

How does a country with such a different educational culture make meaning out of these Western-dominated discourses on educational leadership? Saudi educational institutions have developed many strategies of selective adaptation to use these outside ideas and examples to improve Saudi schools without sacrificing culture. Although there has been resistance to the educational restructuring under the King Abdullah Project, just as educators and leaders have gradually become accustomed to the new programs, so have they become accustomed to the slow trickle of foreign ideas that are being interwoven with existing educational values. Perhaps one of the main reasons this amount of change has been possible has been the administration’s careful efforts to maintain an “Arabic/Islamic personality” in the curriculum (Smith, 2013, p.161). It is difficult to localize and import curricula from other nations while maintaining relevance and appropriateness, a need which only underscores the importance of developing Saudi Arabia’s human capital in teachers and designers of the curriculum (Hussain, 2013).

One of the most popular and talked-about foreign ideas in Saudi educational institutions has been that of mentorship. Mentoring, a practice that has existed informally since the dawn of human civilization, has recently enjoyed

privileged status as a buzzword in the international educational community.

Formal mentoring programs have become commonplace in Western educational institutions, and mentors, both paid and unpaid, are an expected part of job training for many educators (Kram & Isabella, 1985). In Saudi Arabia, mentorship exists informally, and monitors from the Ministry of Education are posted to each new teacher for evaluation purposes. However, student and teacher requests for formal mentoring opportunities are many and vocal. For example, the Emergency Medical Services staff in Riyadh stated that, while they received informal mentoring in their positions, formal mentoring programs would have saved them a great deal of on-the-job stress and allowed them to perform at a higher standard (Leggio, 2013). Semi-structured mentorship has been suggested as a preventative and empowering strategy by numerous Saudi businesswomen as well (Alfrayan, 2014). Female Saudi entrepreneurs and leaders cited the importance of “vicarious experiences of modeling” from other female professionals in developing their self-confidence and professional capabilities, a process which is facilitated by mentorship (Alfrayan, 2014, p. 19). Mentoring as a formal educational practice has been well-received by most Saudi educational institutions, although mentoring opportunities are still few (Ghonem Sywelem & Witte, 2013).

Another facet of Western education that is being increasingly adopted in Saudi Arabia is that of student-centered, rather than teacher-centered, learning. The applications of this concept are understood better through the lens of Saudi culture since they do not always appear to mimic those of other nations, yet they are still valid (Hussain, 2013). Saudi leaders and educators are increasingly recognizing the value of self-evaluation and reflection in their workspaces, a sign that critical thinking and student-centered skills are being developed (Leggio, 2013). The growing idea behind this is that it is becoming more socially and culturally acceptable for leaders to be dynamic and innovative, rather than acting as managers who maintain the status quo (Leggio, 2013). Teachers are beginning to debate whether student-centered practices or teacher-centered practices are superior: the debate in itself shows a cultural shift and the possibility for innovation (Hussain, 2013). Increased demand for official courses on leadership for undergraduate college students also demonstrates that students recognize the importance of these skills (Leggio, 2013, p. 80). Another student demand was for increased in-service professional training — typically most (if not all) job training in Saudi schools is carried out before students' professional careers begin (Ghonem Sywelem & Witte, 2013). However, students reported that they felt in-service professional development activities not only gave them more competence at their jobs, but also imbued them with a sense of agency and empowerment,

both skills that traditionally have been downplayed in education but are coming into their time in Saudi Arabia (Ghonem Sywelem & Witte, 2013).

Finally, the most significant demonstration of Saudi Arabia's willingness to adapt its educational system is in the vast array of international collaborations that have been undertaken in the last decade. The goal of all these interactions with different kinds of institutions is to "build a knowledge-based economy" (Smith, 2013, p.162). King Saud University, the nation's most prestigious university, has developed new online curricula with neighboring Arab countries to overcome the national stigma associated with online education and create curricula based on Islamic values (Smith, 2013). Multinational corporations such as General Motors in the US have also developed partnerships with Saudi schools to provide job training and opportunities (Smith, 2013). Saudi universities have teamed up with universities in other countries to offer joint programs, workshops, and events: In 2011, 130,000 Saudi students were enrolled in overseas educational institutions (Smith, 2013). One American university, Georgia Tech, even received permission to build a physical campus in Saudi Arabia, though the plan eventually fell through (Smith, 2013). Also, the previously-discussed Academic Leadership Center has incorporated guest writers from foreign universities in each of its newsletters and as keynote speakers in its events (Al-Ankari, 2011). The King Abdullah Project's goal of developing a system to provide "world-class"

education incorporates the idea that cooperation with foreign institutions is a necessity for innovation and development.

### **Examples of Leadership Practices, Comparisons, Challenges, and Gaps in the Literature**

Besides the theoretical and policy-level discussions that are occurring, Saudi educational institutions have also been implementing new programs and workshops, as well as surveying students and staff to gauge the most important areas for improvement. Common themes among these examples of leadership training in practice include increased accountability, quality assurance of programs, and honoring learner feedback at or above the level of official policy. A study by Elzubeir (2011) analyzes the impacts of a leadership training workshop conducted in the midst of a problem-based learning program for graduate medical students. The program, which took place within the College of Medicine at King Saud University, focused on establishing a “community of practice” by encouraging professionals to work together rather than simply furthering their ambitions (Elzubeir, 2011, p. 1). The participants in the workshop returned overwhelmingly positive reviews, citing the “flexible and democratic” nature of the program as its main selling points (Elzubeir, 2011, p. 2).

Another study by Leggio (2013) examined the leadership beliefs and training experiences of Emergency Medical Services staff and students in Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi Arabia. This sample included individuals from diverse backgrounds, although all worked in a similar capacity in Saudi society. In this study, the “community of practice” idea from the Elzubeir study was echoed by participants’ desire for increased mentorship programs and overt courses on leadership (Leggio, 2013, p. 50). EMS workers and students also reported a lack of leadership materials in training manuals and unclear definitions of leadership qualities (Leggio, 2013). Students had many suggestions for future leadership programs, including in-service training, simulations, and mentoring; many had been using leadership skills from previous jobs or military service that they did not acquire in their EMS training (Leggio, 2013). The most important aspect, according to the participants, was the value of “empowerment, encouragement, and trust” (Leggio, 2013, p. 40).

Although leadership training opportunities are only a growing minority in Saudi Arabia, the importance of such experiences has been cited by many successful Saudi educators and businesswomen as the most defining aspect of their formative professional period (Alfrayan, 2014). One such program at King Saud University, which trains future elementary and preschool teachers, has been

running for over 25 years and is evolving with the educational reforms of the King Abdullah Project (Hussain, 2013). Students, professors, and administrators surveyed by Hussain in this project were surprised to find most participants preferred the teacher-centered, traditional format of teaching rather than the student-centered methods which are popular in the West at the moment (Hussain, 2013). This was cited as a natural outcome of a collectivist society but is expected to change with the new educational reforms, mainly as the importance of teaching critical thinking grows in official educational policy (Hussain, 2013).

Another study by Ghonem Sywelem and Witte (2013) surveyed elementary teachers regarding their perceptions of leadership and professional competence. Participants cited updating knowledge, training for a changing role, and improving job satisfaction as the ideal goals of professional development programs in leadership (Ghonem Sywelem & Witte, 2013). However, pre-service programs were generally rated as inefficient among participants, who argued that higher priority should be given to in-service training (Ghonem Sywelem & Witte, 2013). Teachers explained that there are certain aspects of teaching that are extremely difficult to teach in a pre-service setting: parent communication, classroom technology, and classroom management (Ghonem Sywelem & Witte, 2013). These skills are best learned in an active, on-the-job context, either through mentorship or continual professional development opportunities,



participants argued. However, many teachers in the survey reported a perceived lack of representation and input in the process of designing professional development opportunities for them — a cultural holdover from previous educational traditions, but one that no longer makes sense in a context where teachers' opinions are supposedly a high priority (Ghonem Sywelem & Witte, 2013).

It may be helpful at this point to contrast the achievements and challenges of Saudi Arabia with those of another country that is not part of the traditional “West.” The African nation of Nigeria shares the history and traditional values of Islam and is also in the midst of an educational revolution. It is important to note that Saudi Arabia and Nigeria have several very drastic differences—namely culture, government, and level of poverty/wealth disparity—but the case of Nigeria as presented by Akata (2008) can offer some insight into how Saudi practices are even more exemplary than Westerners might think. One problem which plagues both nations is the phenomenon of “brain drain” — students who study abroad, earn their degrees, and do not wish to return to contribute to developing their home country's educational system (Akata, 2008, p. 3). It is often challenging for Nigerian colleges to keep their students from staying in the comfortable, developed countries they grow to love after school is over; according

to Akata (2008), the return rate of Nigerian graduate students is “critically disappointing” (Akata, 2008, p. 112).

Saudi schools are currently experiencing the same phenomenon, with students who study abroad (there are over 100,000) using every possible method to avoid returning to Saudi Arabia after graduation by finding a job in the new country, opening a business there, or even marrying a citizen (Smith, 2013). Saudi Arabia and Nigeria both also struggle with corruption, though the flavors of corruption are entirely different for each country. Corruption in Nigeria tends to be much more overt and widespread, based on the concept of “eldership” or veneration of older superiors regardless of their actual contributions (Akata, 2008, p. 115). In Saudi, corruption is much more veiled and usually takes the form of nepotism (which, according to cultural values, is debatable even as a form of corruption) or the rewarding of individuals with political status with comfortable, if not entirely necessary, positions (Aljodea, 2012). Finally, the bureaucratic structures of both nations’ governments and educational systems have also proven problematic, but in different ways. Nigeria’s bureaucracy has been blamed by teachers and postgraduate students as “pushing for conformity” and constraining progress, while in Saudi the bureaucracy has moved away from conformity but retains some inefficiency and resistance to change (Akata, 2008, p. 120). Despite their shared struggles and cultural underpinnings, the educational progress of

Saudi Arabia far outweighs that of Nigeria. Though this can be attributed to Saudi Arabia's far superior wealth and infrastructure, it can also be credited to the expansion of Saudi perceptions and ideas about education, as well as a national enthusiasm for building a self-sufficient, knowledge-based economy (Smith, 2013).

### **Summary**

Given the material and political resources available to Saudi Arabia and the worldwide knowledge pool about education, best practices, training, and technological resources, Saudi Arabia's plan has already created a significant impact for the country. Saudi Arabia has been able to build an educational system that honors its culture and values while also incorporating ideas from the minds and institutions of other nations. It is clear that educational leadership reforms in practice are a small but growing minority in Saudi Arabia. In this study, the SOPEL program will serve as a barometer of Saudi educators' views on the changing importance of developing high-quality leadership and improving distribution of knowledge. This study will outline the perspectives of participants in the program and its perceived professional impacts.

### **CHAPTER III: Methodology**

In this chapter, I discuss the methods I used to examine the effectiveness of the SOPEL program in Saudi Arabia. To gather the richest and most detailed data possible, I used qualitative research methods.

I believe that qualitative methods are the best fit for this descriptive and personalized research. One of the strengths of qualitative research is that the findings are based on an insider's perspective rather than the researcher's "personal stance," meaning they indicate the individual participants' thoughts, feelings, and emotions (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003, p. 176). This type of research is best suited to smaller populations but can yield more detailed and specific data. Qualitative research is also ideal for describing complex relationships. This type of research is highly adaptable and can be altered even during the study to suit the needs of the situation (Creswell, 2013). Finally, qualitative research generates idiographic causation, establishing clear links between certain factors and the events they cause to help us better understand such relationships (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). These causes can be understood because of the "in-depth understanding of meanings, contexts, and processes that qualitative research can provide" (Maxwell, 2012, p. 655). This ability to analyze complex relationships and variables works well with Leithwood

and Levin's (2005) conceptual framework and allows the research to illuminate the unique experiences of SOPEL participants.

While qualitative research is an excellent way to address many research questions, it does possess a few limitations. Qualitative findings may lose accuracy when generalized to describe larger populations (Creswell, 2013). Since qualitative research, in general, is based on the individual participant's experience, it is often more engrossing and time-consuming than quantitative research. Because qualitative research relies on inductive reasoning (Thorne, 2000) rather than numerical data, it is incredibly difficult and inadvisable to make quantitative predictions based on qualitative findings. Also, the organic nature of qualitative research offers more opportunities for participant or researcher bias to skew the results. Bias can enter into any part of the research process, from data collection to the analysis and interpretation of results (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Despite these limitations, qualitative methods were best suited for the research goal of illuminating the experiences of SOPEL participants in a rich and detailed manner.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of the participants of the SOPEL program for educational leaders. The study also

explored participant perspectives on the long-term effects and impacts of the program. This study used a qualitative methodology.

### **Research Questions**

There are several important research questions pertaining to this study:

- 1.How do the participants in the SOPEL program perceive the effectiveness of the program in helping them improve their job performance?
- 2.What are the professional applications of the knowledge and skills acquired through attending the SOPEL program? Are they commensurate with the program's intentions?
- 3.How would the SOPEL participants describe the long-term impacts and effects of their experiences in the program?

### **Research Design**

I used an exploratory qualitative research design to guide my inquiry into participant perspectives about the SOPEL program. The purpose of exploratory qualitative study is to transcend mere description and create or discover a theory based on the data collected (Creswell, 2013). Exploratory qualitative study is best applied to a group of participants who have all experienced the same process, as the SOPEL participants have. The best way to collect data for an exploratory qualitative study is, according to Creswell (2013), by conducting one-on-one

interviews. My goal was to use the participants' feedback to discover if any unifying factors can explain why the SOPEL program may have had a given effect on its participants.

Exploratory qualitative study is a fitting category of research design for this study because the focus is on the perspectives of participants, and the data analysis was heavily shaped and guided by their feedback, as is recommended by Creswell (2013). Using exploratory qualitative study allowed me to move beyond describing participants' experiences (as a narrative study would) and enabled me to discover how the participants' perspectives fit together to form a more coherent portrait of the state of education in Saudi Arabia. My goal was to find common threads in the participants' recollections and projects such that I could form an explanation of certain overarching processes in the Saudi educational system, its recent radical reforms, and how Saudi educators and administrators are making sense of the many changes they have lived through. Participants' feedback generated information that could be applied to the larger phenomenon of educational and leadership change in Saudi Arabia.

### **Defining and Accessing the Research Site**

My research on the SOPEL program took place in some physical and perceived "spaces." Though I did not access the physical campuses of Saudi

educational institutions or Oxford, both places were peripherally discussed in the interviews. I conducted my research via email, telephone, and Skype, so the “sites” to which I needed to gain access were more dialogic than physical. I obtained contact information for the participants of the SOPEL program with the permission of the Tatweer staff, and I obtained participants’ final projects from the same source or from the participants themselves via email (see Appendix A for more information). Final projects were digitally rendered and thus did not require physical copying or presentation.

### **Participant Recruitment, Selection, and Description**

#### **Participant Pool**

The interview participants in this study were drawn from the 40 men and women who participated in the SOPEL program in 2010-2011. Interviews were conducted with ten participants. This group was composed of academic professionals and administrators from a range of disciplines with a common interest in educational leadership. All of these individuals were employed in some capacity in the Saudi educational system between 2010 and 2011 when the program took place. The program had an equal number of male and female participants.



### **Participant Recruitment and Selection Process**

My initial goal was to find the contact information for all 40 of these individuals and reach out to them electronically. Due to my current location in the United States, it was most logical to use electronic communication to speak with participants, rather than meeting face-to-face.

To ensure the protection of the subjects of my research, I sought permission and approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of North Dakota. The IRB reviewed the proposal, the informed consent form, and the interview questions before the research process began. To make initial contact with a representative from the Tatweer Company, I waited until I could visit his office in person during a break from classes. I met with Abdullah Alghamdi, one of the Tatweer Company's Media Coordinators in the Public Relations/Marketing department. Mr. Alghamdi was very welcoming and assured me that I would have the company's full cooperation in my research. He put me in contact with Jenan Alahmad, one of the general managers of the SOPEL program. Ms. Alahmad had access to the full list of contact information for the 40 SOPEL participants, which she gladly shared with me. Once I had obtained these email addresses and names, I sent out my initial email to all the participants welcoming them to take part in the study, along with the consent form and relevant documentation. For more information on this step in the process,

please see the official letter of permission in Appendix A. Only participants who signed the consent form (which can be found in Appendix B) were included in this study. Moreover, Tatweer preferred the use of participant number instead of pseudonyms, hence, throughout this research, participant numbers were used, instead of pseudonyms.

Upon sending out the first email, my results were mixed. Two email addresses bounced back right away as no longer in use. Of the 37 successfully delivered emails, I received 13 replies in the affirmative that participants were interested in the study. One individual replied to my message after seeing my email profile picture, stating that he was not willing to work with a female who did not cover her head! I continued to communicate with the senders of the 13 affirmative responses, providing further information and arranging a time to conduct the interviews.

Some of these conversations moved beyond email and into WhatsApp, a popular text and audio messaging application for mobile devices. WhatsApp enjoys a high degree of popularity in Saudi Arabia, perhaps because it does not allow for voice or video calling. Users can leave each other voice messages or send files or text messages using either a wireless Internet connection or their satellite service. This app is also top-rated in Saudi businesses, especially in

situations where male and female colleagues must work together but are culturally discouraged from meeting face-to-face.

Unfortunately, not all of my thirteen responses maintained an open channel of communication. Several of them stopped responding to my messages or were too busy or otherwise unable to meet for an interview. I ended up receiving six signed digital consent forms and scheduling six online interviews. I also set up times to interview three participants face-to-face during my next visit to Saudi Arabia, as was their preference. I provided the face-to-face interviewees with a copy of the consent form at the time of the interview, and they signed it before proceeding.

Due to these difficulties, participants were not asked probing demographic questions, and hence not much background information about participants could be made available.

### **Description of Participants**

All the participants in this study were employed in some capacity in the Saudi Ministry of Education, some as teachers, some as administrators, and some in the business and marketing end of the Ministry. This group is composed of academic professionals and administrators from a range of disciplines with a common interest in educational leadership. They participated in SOPEL during

the 2010-2011 academic year. I interviewed five females and five males for a total of ten participants in the study. Although more participants initially reached out, some failed to complete the consent form correctly or dropped out of the study due to schedule conflicts. Most participants belong to the mid-to-higher level of management, primarily in the education sector, and a considerable number of them were nearing retirement at the time the training program with Oxford University was held.

The participants had different professional backgrounds, reasons for joining, and methods of preparation for the SOPEL program. This was evident from the differences in their roles in the institutions where they come from. The participants also had different perceptions of how they benefited from the program. Even though the participants underwent the same programming and activities, their theoretical knowledge and practical experience were quite different from one another. The desired application of the knowledge was likewise different.

### **Participant profiles.**

Following is a series of participant profiles with information on academic and professional background, their current professional affiliation or position, how they discovered the SOPEL program, reasons for joining the SOPEL

program, and their thoughts on the SOPEL program's orientation and organization. This information is helpful when considering participants' perspectives in this study. All ten of the participants are employed by the Saudi Ministry of Education, and learned of the SOPEL program after invitation notices were sent to department heads at the Ministry. Once Ministry management received this notice, they selected who qualified for participation in the SOPEL program, on the basis of their employees' English language proficiency, educational and/or professional background and experiences, as well as their current professional responsibilities at the Ministry of Education. Those thusly selected were nominated for program participation, and accepted such nomination.

A common thread in the transcripts of all participant interviews is that they all held the SOPEL program in high esteem immediately upon learning of it, often identifying its affiliation with Oxford University in support of their opinions. A majority of the interviewed participants cited their desire to develop their leadership skills as a subsequent reason to joining the program.

Participant No. 1 holds a Master's and a Ph.D. degree in Education, and taught in the Saudi public school system, prior to joining the Ministry of Education in a supervisory capacity.

Participant No. 2 holds Bachelor's degree in English, and taught public school in Saudi Arabia prior to joining the management team at the Ministry of Education.

Participant No. 3 earned a Master's in Education, and worked in the field of early childhood development prior to joining the Ministry of Education in a leadership capacity.

Participant No. 4 currently works as a supervisor at the Saudi Ministry of Education, overseeing the assessment and development team. This participant joined the Ministry after earning a Ph.D. in Education.

Participant No. 5 taught in public school in Saudi Arabia, and then moved to the field of professional and assessment development. This participant earned a Master's degree and a Ph.D. in a social science-related field, and has worked as a lecturer and an administrator in Saudi Arabian schools prior to joining the Ministry of Education, in Saudi Arabia.

Participant No. 6 joined the Saudi Ministry of Education after earning a Master's degree in Education, and is charged with planning and development at the Ministry of Education.

Participant No. 7 holds a Master's degree and a Ph.D. in Education, and spent a few years teaching in a Saudi public school prior to joining the Ministry of Education in a supervisory capacity.

Participant No. 8 currently works in an advisory capacity for the Ministry of Education. This participant joined the Ministry after earning a Ph.D. in Education.

Participant No. 9 holds a Bachelor degree in Education, joined the Saudi Ministry of Education after earning a Master's degree in Education.

Participant No. 10 holds a Master's degree in Education, and worked in the Saudi public school system as a teacher, and in a supervisory capacity, prior to joining the management team at the Ministry of Education. This participant is currently working at the Saudi Ministry of Education, in a supervisory capacity.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected for this study in two ways: interviews and a review of the participants' final SOPEL projects. Conducting personal interviews allowed me to obtain personalized data about each participant. Additionally, the interviews allowed me to view the SOPEL program through each person's unique perspective. I also analyzed the participants' final projects, which were challenging to obtain and often incomplete. While these documents do convey some information, many of the final projects did not contain enough information to foster a thorough analysis. It was incredibly difficult to gain information without a video or audio recording of the presentation. It should be noted that the

participants had overwhelmingly negative views of the utility of the projects.

Although there were many negative aspects, I still have chosen to include them in this study. These difficulties I observed with the final projects as data sources are included as a limitation of my study.

### **Interviews**

Individual interviews were conducted with ten SOPEL program participants. The interviews took place in three different ways: Skype, WhatsApp, and face-to-face, and lasted roughly 60 minutes. I conducted three interviews in each category, based on the interviewee's preference, for a total of ten interviews. The Skype interviews took the form of a recorded online conversation in which I briefly introduced the participant and then asked them, in order, the questions listed in Appendix C. I recorded these conversations on my phone so that I could make a detailed transcript of them later. Because WhatsApp does not allow for live conferencing, the WhatsApp interviews took on a slightly different character. In these interviews, I sent questions via text message to the participants, and the participants responded with audio recordings of their answers to each question. I saved these audio files and pieced together my transcript from each person's collection. The face-to-face interviews took place on a trip I made back to Saudi Arabia. I recorded these interviews on my phone for transcription



purposes as well. Interviews were conducted in English (with some incidental bits of Arabic emerging as is natural among bilingual speakers), and the transcriptions were translated fully into English before the coding took place.

Transcripts of the audio recordings were shown to participants after the interviews, at which time they were given the opportunity to ask for any part of the interview to be withheld from the final analysis (see Appendix C for the interview questions). Although all participants were given this opportunity, none of them felt that changes to the transcripts were needed.

### **Final Projects**

I conducted a qualitative content analysis of five of the participants' final projects, which were completed as a requirement of their enrollment in the program. These final projects were assigned by the designers of the SOPEL program to further each participant's unique professional goals and vary according to the diverse pool of positions and fields from which the participants were drawn. Projects took the form of a PowerPoint presentation or PDF presentation detailing an initiative or proposal intended to better the participant's professional environment in some manner. The number of projects analyzed was informed by the projects' length and depth and the diversity of participants' positions and occupations. Projects were selected based on the availability of

materials, the willingness of participants to share their work, and the coincidence of available projects with interview participants so that I could use the interview data to enlighten the project analysis further.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process was conducted in stages. Through interviews I gathered information about each participant's personal and professional context, motivations, pressures, and challenges. These findings were incorporated and assessed in addition to the analysis of the participants' projects. In this way, collected data were enriched with contextual, cultural, and personal significance, helping me to understand the complex relationships of different kinds of variables on a person's performance.

The data from open-ended interviews of participants was qualitatively coded first by conducting line-by-line coding, where I read every line and coded it according to the dominant code or theme according to the participants' different perceived experiences during the program. These perceptions differed in terms of training and the cultural implications of being hosted in the UK by Oxford staff. The substantial improvements to the professional skills of the participants as well as to their personal lives, which developed as a consequence of the SOPEL Program, were also coded (see Appendix D). In the second step, I completed

focused coding wherein categories identified in line-by-line coding were focused, concatenated, and nested into logical categories. After that, I engaged in axial coding where final themes and sub-themes were created by categorizing the focused coding themes under umbrella themes based on similarities.

### **Interviews**

The initial coding of interview data required reading through the interview transcripts and selecting the dominant word or idea from each line of text. This process illuminated patterns and repetition in the text, as well as displaying particularly outstanding items (Saldaña, 2013). Using the coded information to inform the research helps eliminate bias because it uses the voice of the data as a source rather than the researcher's ideas or preconceptions. In coding these interview transcripts, I used Leithwood and Levin's (2005) framework to guide my search for relationships between individuals and government, personal and professional goals, and sponsorship and motivation. Line by line coding of all interviews (10) and project documents (5) resulted in 101 categories of coding. The initial codebooks can be found in Appendix D (for the interviews) and Appendix E (for the projects) at the end of this document.

After the initial coding, I began focused coding, which, "categorizes coded data based on thematic or conceptual similarity" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 209).

Focused and axial coding are both “second-cycle” coding methods, according to Saldaña (2013), which take place after the line-by-line coding is complete. This process involved reviewing the transcripts of the interviews and allowing all of the collected data to coalesce. This further narrowed the scope of the data and distilled it into clear categories. I attempted to separate the initial codes from my study into Leithwood and Levin’s (2005) mediating, moderating, antecedent, independent, and dependent categories. Based on the framework of Leithwood and Levin (2005), the following categories were identified from focused coding: (1) Benefits, (2) Cultural Sensitivity in the Program, (3) Final Project Details, (4) Participant Outcomes as Documented in Project Plans, (5) Participants’ Selection, (6) Reduce Hurdles, (7) Training Methodology. Antecedent categories was composed of a focused coding category of “Participants Selection.” All its sub-categories, such as participants’ qualifications, etc., were classified as antecedent categories, since these remote factors contribute to the achievement of the dependent variable, i.e., Benefits. The mediating category in this case is the focused coding category of Participant Outcomes as Documented in Project Plans, because success in documenting project plans is the core and key exercise toward the final impact and benefits (dependent variable) of the training (independent variable) received and retained by the participants. For moderating categories, the training methodology (independent variable) is made effective by the focused

coding category of Cultural Sensitivity in the Program; and by the focused coding category of Reduce Hurdles; hence these two are the moderating categories in this case. The dependent variable is the focused coding category of Benefits, including all its sub-categories of impact for Saudi Arabia, such as professional growth, etc. In other words, the independent variables are the focused coding category of Training Methodology and Final Project Details, along with all the sub-categories of these two independent variables. See the details of category coding, described in Table 1.

Table 1

*Category Coding Alignment with Framework Variables*

Coding			Leithwood & Levin (2005) Variables
Participant Selection & Qualifications		Participant	Antecedent
Participant Outcomes			Mediating
Cultural Sensitivity & Reduce Hurdles			Moderating

I noticed that the participants' experiences were subject to many different antecedent categories, some of which hindered their progress in the program and some of which contributed to frustration for other reasons. Similarly, I discovered

that at different stages of the program, the importance of mediating and moderating categories fluctuated considerably - for example, participants had very different challenges working on their final projects from Saudi Arabia than they did while studying at Oxford. This step helps me to gain insight into the complex relationships that SOPEL participants have developed with their professional networks and with the Ministry.

Under focused coding, the categories identified in line-by-line coding were reduced from 101 categories to seven categories. These categories included: (1) Benefits, (2) Cultural Sensitivity in the Program, (3) Final Project Details, (4) Participant Outcomes as Documented in Project Plans, (5) Participants' Selection, (6) Reduce Hurdles, and (7) Training Methodology. All of these major categories had two major themes which revealed further data. Category 1: Participants in the study viewed the same experiences differently. Some participants viewed experiences negatively while others viewed the same experiences positively. Category 2: Most participants identified at least some benefits of the program for their professional performance. However, there were also many issues that were identified. It is interesting to note that the benefits identified by the participants in the interviews were generally described while, when compared with the quality of their final project reports, they show

remarkable professional quality – the reports are results-based and used solid quantifiable indicators and a strong results-based framework. However, it is not clear how much of it was the result of their training and how much can be attributed to their prior competence levels.

The final stage of interview coding, axial coding, “describes a category’s properties and dimensions and explores how the categories and subcategories relate to each other” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 209). I noticed that participants were struggling with logistical issues and institutional hurdles, that they were frustrated by a perceived excess of heterogeneity in their group, and that they felt disheartened by the lack of quality control and follow-through in the final stages of the program. The resulting “axes” allowed me to focus my full attention on the most worthy topics. Five categories of data emerged from this step, which eventually became the HORSE framework. The five themes of the HORSE framework—which include Have Separate Initiatives to Train Leaders and Managers, Open up Opportunities for All Candidates’ Success, Reduce Hurdles to Success and Maximize Potential, Select Participants Carefully, and Evaluate Outcomes Using a Third Party Quality Control Organization—while not directly analogous to Leithwood and Levin’s (2008) framework, are outgrowths of this theory in a more specific and regionally-focused context.

### **Final Projects**

In an attempt to better understand the phenomenon of the SOPEL program, I next undertook the task of analyzing a subset of the SOPEL participants' final projects. I began by examining the raw texts (in this case, the SOPEL PowerPoint projects). The steps in this process of content analysis include "unitizing," "sampling," "coding," "reducing," "inferring," and "narrating" (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 84). Krippendorff describes unitizing as the process of breaking down texts into small, consistent pieces, and sampling as choosing a sensible and appropriate group of texts to study. Next, he explains coding, which involves distilling the meaning and common themes in the text, which is followed by reducing or removing extraneous and irrelevant data. Finally, the researcher is left with inferences based on the underlying themes and patterns in the data, which are presented to the public as a narrative (Krippendorff, 2013). Utilizing this qualitative content analysis model allowed me to have a more holistic view of the SOPEL program participants' final projects and led me to my ultimate decision to leave out the final project content from this document.

Krippendorff (2013) also explains three basic principles and motivations of content analysis, which I employed to break down and better understand the data from the final projects. He states that engaging in content analysis helps



researchers discover the “manifest characteristics of communication” (audience, style, and content), the “antecedents of communication” (reasons for communicating), and the “consequences of communication” (effects of the act of communicating) (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 51). In my study, I was able to ascertain what precisely the SOPEL participants were trying to achieve by their projects and for whose benefit, what motivations and cultural factors led them to choose their topics, and the possible effects and implications of each project.

Leithwood and Levin’s (2005) framework, which guided me at the outset of this research endeavor, remained helpful to me throughout the data analysis process and was instrumental in the creation of the HORSE framework of educational leadership innovation. The categories of antecedent, independent, dependent, mediating, and moderating categories were helpful to me in the coding process as well as in the construction of an exploratory qualitative study based on the data. Because of the complexity of the SOPEL program and the context in which it was situated, it was beneficial to be able to separate the different variables involved in the program and the participants’ responses to it into the five different categories provided by Leithwood and Levin (2005). Additionally, the Leithwood and Levin (2005) framework’s focus on localization rather than a one-size-fits-all approaches to leadership was incredibly supportive of the cluster of

ideas that became the HORSE framework, which is specifically tailored for implementation in Saudi Arabia. The HORSE framework is further discussed in Chapter 4.

### **Validity**

The findings that are generated through this qualitative approach must be validated. I attempted to ensure the internal and external validity of my results. Internal validity refers to the "...degree of certainty that observed effects in an experiment are the result of the experimental treatment or condition [the cause], rather than intervening, extraneous or confounding variables" ("Data Analysis," 2006, p. 1). Besides making a strong effort to ground any conclusions made about the SOPEL program in factual evidence, as well as trying to eliminate as much bias as possible, I consulted with a trusted Saudi educational professional to provide feedback and a critical eye for my findings. This consultant, Dr. Badr, is a professor at King Saud University, Saudi Arabia's most prestigious university. Dr. Badr is renowned for his long years of experience and his impartial attitude. External validity, or the propensity of findings to be applied to the real world, was also an essential goal of this study. The study naturally possesses external validity because of the content collected and the importance in Saudi Arabia of continually improving educational programming and development. Dr. Badr

helped with quality assurance to certify that my analysis methods and practices are consistent with my research goals and were as free of bias as possible.

As another way of ensuring the validity of this study, I kept a reflexive journal throughout the process of collecting and analyzing data. These frequent memos to myself served as checkpoints and illustrations of the development of whatever theory may emerge from the data collected. Creswell (2013) suggests memoing as a good part of developing exploratory qualitative study because it helps to “sketch out the flow” of the theory creation process (p. 85). I frequently memoed throughout my research – after communicating with the participants initially, after each interview, and consistently as I collected and analyzed further data.

To further guarantee validity, the collected interview data was subject to participant review in the hope that participants would catch any errors or traces of bias. Final projects were analyzed with the help of Dr. Badr’s cultural and academic expertise. I also maintained a high standard of accuracy and consistency when collecting data to ensure that both human and technological error was avoided. In the cases of technological error, such as poor quality audio, I consulted with participants to ask for clarification on the data they shared.

### **Reliability**

As a researcher, I must endeavor to certify the reliability of my findings through exacting data collection standards and minimal bias. In this study, I employed the strategies of *persistent observation*, *peer review*, *thick description*, and *member checks* as described by Creswell (2013) to maximize the reliability of my study. As a Saudi citizen and academic and professional participant in the Saudi education system, I am engaged in the research sample demographic on a regular basis. This allows me insight into what topics and issues may be most relevant to the study. I also submitted my research for peer review, both from my consultant Dr. Badr and from my advisor at the University of North Dakota. I used the techniques of “thick description” outlined by Creswell (2013) in my memos to provide an accurate and detailed portrait of my research process (p. 51). To perform member checks, when I conducted an interview, I shared the transcript of the interview with the interviewee and allow him or her to make any changes or addenda he or she feels necessary. Using these measures, I hope to ensure the reliability of my study.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the primary researcher in this study, it was important for me to draw from other researchers who have worked either in a qualitative approach or who

have done significant work relative to the context of educational leadership, ideally in Saudi Arabia. I built my research questions and design on the growing body of literature on educational leadership in Saudi Arabia and around the world, and my familiarity with the literature helped me to overcome the challenge of being a solitary researcher. This study also presented a challenge to my objectivity and ability to eliminate bias. The need to remain objective in any research is made increasingly difficult by the notion that personal biases can come from a variety of sources, including a person's race, gender, religion, age, life experiences, and education, to name a few (Mehra, 2002). As a graduate student, a product of the Saudi educational system, and a Saudi citizen, I had to make a conscious effort not to allow my personal experiences to skew the research design or analysis. I followed the recommendations of Ahern (1999) and complimented my analysis with memos explaining my relevant personal experience with regards to the Saudi educational system, its history, and the cultural context within which the SOPEL program took place.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While there were 40 original participants in the SOPEL study, not all of them were able or willing to participate in the study. Because of the nature of the study, more participants would have been desirable, especially because it is

difficult to generalize larger systemic issues from the reports of a few individuals. For this study, it is assumed that participants answered openly and honestly in the interview. There were also some obstacles to clarity, efficiency, and authenticity in collecting data in Saudi Arabia from a position in the US. Online and telecommunication services are reliable, but each kind of technology has its limitations. The cultural limitations of using technology in Saudi Arabia include a cultural preference for face-to-face communication, a lack of universal technological skill, and the inability of a researcher to pick up on more subtle forms of communication, such as body language, posture, and facial expressions, during a telephone interview or through Skype. There was also the possibility that certain male participants in the study might be uncomfortable in an interview with a female researcher. I was fortunate enough to receive helpful responses from the male participants who reached out to me, but I fear that my gender may have precluded more males from replying. Overall, interviewing the ten participants who replied and analyzing their final projects was a reasonably smooth endeavor.

### **Summary**

Within this chapter, I outlined the qualitative approach I used to evaluate the perspectives of the participants of the SOPEL program. As mentioned, this

was an exploratory qualitative study approach to this study's design, as I used qualitative measures. Participants' identities were given the utmost discretion, and I endeavored to exercise the highest degree of cultural sensitivity in conducting the research. To secure accurate results that are valid both internally and externally, the highest standards for data collection were maintained. The counsel of objective third parties, such as Dr. Badr, and the participants themselves, were incorporated into the data analysis to aid objectivity and reliability. All of these measures contributed to the development of a study which was both methodologically sound and valuable for educators as well as policymakers.

## **CHAPTER IV: Findings**

This chapter discusses the findings of the study. First, I briefly reiterate the purpose of the study and the research questions sought to be answered. I discuss the results of my data collection and analysis, and the themes that emerged from my analysis of the participants' responses. I present participant quotes in support of each emergent theme of the research questions. Finally, a summary of the chapter is presented.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of the participants of the SOPEL program for educational leaders. The study also explored their perspectives on the long-term effects and impacts of the program. This study focused on the backgrounds of the participants and their experiences in leadership that were strengthened by the SOPEL program. The experiences of the participants and the takeaway from the SOPEL program were likewise added to the data collected and analyzed in this chapter. This study involved the use of qualitative methodology.

### **Research Questions**

There are several important research questions pertaining to this study:



1. How do the participants in the SOPEL program perceive the effectiveness of the program in helping them improve their job performance?
2. What are the professional applications of the knowledge and skills acquired through attending the SOPEL program, as experienced by participants? Are they commensurate with the program's intentions?
3. How would the SOPEL participants describe the long-term impacts and effects of their experiences in the program?

### **Responding to Research Questions**

#### **Question #1**

**How do the participants in the SOPEL program perceive the effectiveness of the program in helping them improve their job performance?**

The participants claimed unanimously that the SOPEL program was beneficial in one way or another in helping them to improve their job performance upon returning to their ordinary employment after the program was complete. These areas of benefit include increased networking connections, improved prestige and credentials based on their work completed within SOPEL, and greater skills and knowledge of additional resources and strategies to complete their work. Participants also noted that participating in the SOPEL program gave them a better sense of their individual leadership styles.

Participant quotes corresponding to the focused coding categories of (1) Benefits, (2) Cultural Sensitivity in the Program, (3) Final Project Details, (4) Participant Outcomes as Documented in Project Plans, (5) Participants' Selection, (6) Reduce Hurdles, and (7) Training Methodology that emerged from their responses are presented below.

### ***Networking connections.***

Participants attributed some improvements in job performance to increased networking connections that they enjoyed based on the SOPEL experience. This was documented and coded under the focused coding category of "Benefits." Under this category, they recognized that the connections they made there with other educators would help them advance professionally even after the program's end. Participant No. 10 recalled that the SOPEL program sought to encourage the development of professional relationships via a number of activities designed to make everyone closely acquainted with fellow program participants. Participant No. 3 also made reference to the benefits of these networking activities, reporting that sh/e experienced "the formation of an intimate connection with these colleagues." Participant No.7 recalled that such networking persisted throughout the program's duration, stating that "even when we were eating lunch together, we made sure we ate with different people, and

that everyone took turns sitting at different tables.” This benefit largely took place over the course of the Oxford component of the program but extended beyond the Oxford phase to include time spent back home in Saudi Arabia working together on the final projects.

### *Prestige and credentials.*

Nearly all of the participants proclaimed that they experienced improved prestige and credentials as a result of taking part in the SOPEL program, and were impressed with the program’s affiliation with Oxford University. These comments were coded under the focused categories of “Benefits” and “Participant Outcomes as Documented in Project Plans.” For instance, Participant No. 4 reported an appreciation of the Saudi affiliation with a program “which holds such strategic importance” when describing Oxford University. Participant No. 5 noted that Oxford University is well known for its professional development programs, which is why Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Education collaborated with this university. Sh/e said, “Issues of particular concern to the Ministry are improving teachers and curricula, and developing students’ activities. How to convey knowledge? How to build up the spirit of creativity? These are the issues and top concerns of the Ministry of Education. They’re of strategic importance. Oxford has their own projects for professional development. So [participation in]

this program will be enlightening for them.” Finally, Participant No. 1 spoke of Oxford University’s outstanding reputation, saying “I wanted to join the [SOPEL] program when I heard that it’s going to take place at Oxford University. You know, the reputation of Oxford University as a well-recognized institution, as well as to take place in their business school—it catered to high-level training in management.”

### ***Knowledge of resources and strategies.***

At the SOPEL program, participants reported improvement in general professional skills, and knowledge of and familiarity with additional resources and strategies to complete their work. Such comments were coded under the focused category of “Participant Outcomes as Documented in Project Plans.” Under this category, Participant No. 8 gave a specific example of how participation in the training program improved his professional skills, saying “From my personal point of view, it helped me to reach and suitably train teachers at my workplace, where I implemented my experience gained from SOPEL in creating and applying an online training program for more than 20 teachers at their workplace. This saved the Ministry time, effort, and money.” Participant No. 2 attributed her/his professional growth in management styles and techniques to her/his involvement in the program, and credited it for aiding in resolving some of the problems confronting her/his position back home. Sh/e attributed these

new managerial credentials to the time spent at Oxford University, concluding, “I benefitted a lot from the Oxford program itself in my [specific] field of work. I was able to create a direct connection between what I learned there, and solving what are some of my current conflicts or problems at home. So, frankly speaking, I benefitted from the program a lot.”

At the program, they took part in a number of workshops which exposed them to new sources of information to enhance their professional performance. For example, Participant No. 7 reported that “our field visits to other schools and institutions that differ from our schools and institutions familiarized with expanded knowledge, a benefit that we brought back to our field of education.” Similarly, Participant No. 5 spoke of the value of their visits to other schools, reflecting that, “The visits we carried out to some of the other institutions in [the city of] Oxford really introduced us to different educational systems. For example, visiting a boarding school...[and seeing] how students are educated...and accommodated in the school. [Seeing] the way these schools operate, the schools’ vision, as well as their administrators together with their educators, witnessing all of this was so valuable.”

### ***Understanding leadership styles.***

Participants claimed that participating in SOPEL helped them to understand their leadership styles and personalities better, and empowered them

to pursue new roles in their professions. The improvement in self-knowledge and praxis was largely attributed to the content of the SOPEL program workshops and to the act of collaborating with peers in a professional setting. These comments fell under the focused coding category of “Benefits.” Participant No. 9 said, “I believe the SOPEL program changed my understanding of many management concepts. The program transformed me from a traditional director to an educational leader.” Participant No. 8 described his experience as follows, “The program will pave the way for me personally to switch from my current administrative role to one in leadership, as the general director of assessment at the Ministry of Education.” Participant No. 1 observed that, “What impressed me the most, and many my fellow participants also, was the teamwork work at Oxford University, as an example for simplicity, understanding, and participation decision-making.”

Another aspect of the SOPEL program invited experts in the fields of education and leadership, managers and directors, to speak to the participants. Their presentations exposed participants to their personal experiences, and a number of different styles and practices of professionals engaged in being leaders in a variety of fields. Participant No. 2 spoke about the visit of former CEO of a telecommunications company, and his presentation to SOPEL, saying, “A conversation took place with him and other such experts, who spoke to us and

discussed different topics related to leadership and management and how they practiced these. In this way, they transferred their own experiences to us. They talked about some of the challenges they faced in their daily work, and the reasons they responded to them like they did. These [presentations] were followed by a group discussion between [the experts and participants]. We could ask questions and talk to them about our concerns and challenges.”

### **Summary**

In summary, an examination of participants’ comments revealed the SOPEL program’s effectiveness in augmenting their professional success. All ten participants confirmed a positive influence upon boosting their professional relationships. Similarly, all were impressed by the program’s affiliation with the prestigious Oxford University. The participants acknowledged that the final projects stage of the SOPEL experience served as an opportunity to put the skills they learned to practice. Finally, several participants stated that the program provided a variety of new professional resources and improved their leadership skills. These responses fall under the focused coding categories of “Benefits,” and “Participant Outcomes as Documented in Project Plans.”

**Question #2**

**What are the professional applications of the knowledge and skills acquired through attending the SOPEL program, as experienced by participants? Are they commensurate with the program's intentions?**

The SOPEL program's original goals, as stated in Chapter 1, were to:

- 1) promote leadership development, including modernization, economic improvement, and international cooperation,
- 2) to provide participants with exposure to excellent leadership practices, and
- 3) to inspire participants to apply their knowledge in their professional practice.

Participant quotes corresponding to the focused coding categories of "Participant Outcomes as Documented in Project Plans" and "Training Methodology" that emerged from their responses are presented below.

***Promoting leadership development.***

This benefit speaks not only to the benefits enjoyed by the participants themselves, but also by the Saudi Ministry of Education. These participant comments fall under the focused coding categories of "Participant Outcomes as Documented in Project Plans" and "Training Methodology." For



the Ministry, selecting a pool of participants from a variety of administrative positions was first and foremost an investment in the nation's professional leaders. The SOPEL experience exposed participants to innovative methods of leadership. This inspired participants to develop new and fresh approaches to leadership back home, ones that are more modern, cost effective and economically sound. Participant No. 4 described this as follows: "We worked and got tired, but we could not deny that SOPEL has developed our characters...[and the] development of individuals contributes to the development of organizations. This will not be considered a waste of time, money, and effort by the Ministry because it represents an investment in developing the mentalities of the people who act as the decision-makers, those who are appointed to decision making posts. The overall goal was to develop agents of change inside the Ministry." Participant No. 6 concluded, "As trainees in this pioneering program, we returned home where we could incorporate our experiences to improve how we work there."

### ***Providing exposure to excellent leadership practices.***

Participants claimed that the final projects served as their vehicle for implementing the skills they learned from the SOPEL experience. These participant quotes fall under the focused coding categories of "Participant Outcomes as Documented in Project Plans," and "Training Methodology."

Participant No. 3 commented that “in this stage of the program, we worked as a team. We applied the knowledge we gained about being leaders. As a team, we realized the participatory responsibility when we accomplished our [final] project, beyond all odds.” Participant No. 9 said, “We received approval [from the Ministry] to work together on our final project, and we formed a group based on our common interests. We were able to identify areas of weakness in the [educational] system, then we came up with targeted solutions and effective ways of implementing changes and improvements.”

***Inspiring participants to apply knowledge to professional practice.***

Several participants evaluated their SOPEL experience as positive and inspiring. They reported that program’s events bolstered their confidence in expanding their professional roles. These participant quotes fall under the focused coding category of “Participant Outcomes as Documented in Project Plans,” as participants commented about how the projects helped them apply their training to professional practice.

Participant No. 10 gave an example of how this newly acquired knowledge was beneficial, stating “We took from what we saw of the successful educational system in Britain and we applied it. We took the positive sides from their system and adapted it to fit in with our society, and used it in our educational

system. We adapted all that was valuable and useful without exception.”

Participant No. 3 also spoke of implementing the SOPEL training, reporting:

“This [SOPEL] course was designed in a way that we were able to apply what we learned, and the tasks we did within the course, to our work. I used what I learned to tackle a problem in the educational system of Saudi Arabia, and propose a solution which the government can adopt.”

### **Summary**

In summary, participants’ reported a wide range of professional applications of the SOPEL program. Furthermore, they described many opportunities for applying the knowledge and skills acquired through attending the SOPEL program in developing their professional life. Participants talked about the effectiveness of the final projects in exposing them to putting what they learned into practice. Finally, the participants acknowledged that the final projects stage of the SOPEL experience served as an opportunity to put the skills they learned into practice.

### **Question #3**

**How would the SOPEL participants describe the long-term impacts and effects of their experiences in the program?**

All participants agreed that they enjoy positive long-term impacts from the SOPEL program. The most prominent themes in participants' descriptions of their experiences from their involvement in the SOPEL program are presented in this section. These comments were coded under the focused coding category of "Final Project Details" and "Participant Outcomes as Documented in Project Plans," as well as under the focused coding category of "Training Methodology." For some, the import relates predominantly to how the program developed their leadership skills, while others described the new skills they acquired there, and also credited SOPEL for polishing the skills they already had. The participants were pleased with the ways in which SOPEL program organizers highly respected their cultural and religious practices.

### ***Professional improvement.***

One of the benefits reported by participants in the SOPEL program was an increased self-awareness and self-knowledge about their leadership styles and their praxis and positionality in their work environment. Participant No. 6 reflected, "I think that gathering with people, and knowing them and their experiences—sharing our experiences, and talking about ideas—was a very, very good outcome." An important gain to participants who took part in the SOPEL experience was how it advanced development not only on a professional level, but on a personal one. Participant No. 4 spoke to this benefit, stating, "This

[experience] was really new to me, and I liked it. And it really reflected my thoughts about myself, and my perceptions. It helped me in my later endeavors in life and in work.” Participant No. 9 said, “I believe the SOPEL program changed my understanding of many management concepts. The program transformed me from a traditional director to an educational leader.”

### ***Cultural implications.***

Another long-term positive impact reported by participants relates to their travel from Saudi Arabia to Oxford, in order to see how educational leadership looked in a foreign country. The SOPEL participants responded favorably to the opportunity to learn from another country’s experts and to take their knowledge home to their positions in the education system. Participants viewed this opportunity as a step toward weakening some of the existing barriers to gender equality and unfettered cooperation in Saudi society. The SOPEL program represents the very first time in Saudi educational history where men and women were invited together to attend the seminar together, where they attended the program workshops and other planned event together and side by side. Prior to SOPEL, men and women attended such program events separately, the men grouped in one room, the women in another. Participant No. 3 reflected that, “This relationship [women and men attending together as a team] facilitated our performance. It created a good model of cooperation between men and women,

one that improved both the professional and personal awareness....Participants benefitted from it, and it enlightened them.” Participant No. 1 added, “Despite this being the first time, where we worked together, men and women, the treatment was very sophisticated among everyone, and respectful. Women felt like they were among their brothers, and they were responsible for them. They took care of them and of their requirements, meaning that the atmosphere in general was very comfortable.”

Participants were pleased with the accommodations made at Oxford to respect their cultural and religious traditions and beliefs. For example, men and women attended the program together, but their personal space was respected such that they did not mingle inappropriately. Additionally, the meals that were prepared for participants did not have any pork ingredients, and certain areas within Oxford were set aside as private prayer rooms. Participant No. 6 appreciated Oxford’s respect for their values: “The most beautiful thing was the chef—he was Indian Muslim so everything was cooked Halal. And they provided [us with] prayer carpets, and a sticker identifying the direction of Qibla [the correct direction to face when praying]. Moreover, most of the information was provided in the Arabic language.”

### **Summary**

In summary, participants described a number of lasting impacts and positive outcomes of their overall SOPEL experience, as coded under the focused coding categories of “Benefits,” “Final Project Details,” “Participant Outcomes as Documented in Project Plans,” and “Training Methodology.”

The formation of professional relationships ranked as one of the most frequently cited benefits. The program was also credited with encouraging significant personal reflection and growth. Finally, the SOPEL program achieved a historical turning point in terms of gender relations in Saudi culture. Inviting male and female colleagues to collaborate while attending every event on the program’s schedule was a very progressive and empowering element of the program experience. In addition, participants valued how greatly considerate Oxford University was of their unique cultural and religious identities.

### **Emerging Themes**

After analyzing the categories of responses to the research questions and their corresponding subcategories, the following themes emerged:

- 1) The participants had different perceived experiences during the program regarding training and the cultural implications of being hosted in the UK by Oxford staff (“Theme One,” Table 3).

2)The SOPEL program created substantial improvements to the professional skills of the participants, as well as to their personal lives (“Theme Two,” Table 3).

### **Theme One**

The participants had different perceived experiences during the program regarding training and the cultural implications. The first theme considers the perceived experiences of the participants during the SOPEL program regarding training and the cultural implications. Table 2 presents a summary of the participants' observations about their training experiences. “Exam” pertains to the preliminary questionnaire taken by the SOPEL participants. “Speakers” pertains to the roster of speakers who presented their views during the SOPEL program. “Inspiring Leaders” pertains to the ability of the SOPEL program to provide motivation and inspiration to the participants. “Saudi Culture” pertains to the participants’ experiences of differences between Saudi and British culture. “Politics” pertains to the participants’ perceptions of differences in political norms between Saudi Arabia and Britain. “Gender” pertains to any facets of participant experience colored or affected by gender. “Networking benefit” refers to the experiences that SOPEL participants had in meeting and exchanging ideas and contact information with both each other and British representatives and staff



at Oxford. “Final projects” refers to the experiences of the SOPEL participants in creating, presenting, and sharing their final projects.

Table 2

*Experiences of the Participants*

Codes	# of sources who mentioned this topic	# of references made to this topic
Exam	5	5
Speakers	2	2
Inspiring Leaders	6	9
Saudi Culture-Difference	5	6
Politics	2	2
Gender	2	2
Final Projects	10	15

**Exam.**

The exam or the questionnaire was given before the voyage to the UK was frequently mentioned by SOPEL participants. According to Participant No. 1, “[The questionnaire] was long and includes many questions.... This program

makes you evaluate yourself in many aspects about the subject of validity and reliability.” The psychological exam, also called the 360 exam, was meant to evaluate the participants’ mental and emotional fitness to undergo the SOPEL program. Additionally, according to Participant No. 4, “All applicants were subject to English language and psychological tests organized by Oxford University [called the 360-degree feedback test]. Successful applicants were personally interviewed by an Oxford University representative to select only 40 applicants to attend the program.”

Participant No. 9 particularly valued the exam for its usefulness as a vehicle for self-awareness:

This exam helped me to explore some characteristics in my personality. Of course, it is about your leadership personality, which I need to look at, improve, or maybe change, which is - which applies to everybody. What you do not know yourself unless the others reflect it to you. It is uneasy to have the others input about yourself, but in a sort of examination, which is administered anonymously, and analyzed by experts, you will benefit a lot, and you trust this sort of feedback.

**Speakers and inspiring leaders.**

The presence of inspiring speakers helped the participants to gain new insights and knowledge that would be helpful in the practice of their profession.

According to Participant No. 5:

The content was mainly dependent on discussions and conversations between experts and leaders. The concept lies in giving international experiences, debating these experiences. They suggest ideas, debate and challenge each other. One of the most important things was that leaders of the Ministry of Education used to work individually. So, why don't they work as a team on one project? Therefore, we have tried to achieve this. The [participants] worked together [in the SOPEL program]. Of course there was a hidden agenda that we tried to support; namely to make men work together with women.

The speakers were so effective that even Participant No. 9 was quick to note that, "The second thing we benefited from, or I benefited from personally, is the inspiring lectures, which were introduced to us by some CEOs, or experts people of ministers of education, or vice ministers of education." Indeed, the

presence of speakers that are effective in conveying information is key to a successful workshop.

Participant No. 1 was quick to note that the open-mindedness of the leaders helped them attain the program's goal:

Some [participants] were open-minded [already] themselves, to [feedback from] our leaders. We all confessed that there is obsolete thinking that should be changed. You know, Saudi Arabia only started this kind of travel in the past ten years only. When we travel there [to the UK] people kind of look at us because there was no travel culture like in Kuwait which was open-minded long ago. This thing [the SOPEL program] should have happened [long ago], which frankly speaking, has changed education at our end.

The presence of decision-makers in the program also helped in ensuring that the program would be able to train and develop leadership. According to Participant No. 2:

Then when we impressed the decision makers, we changed a lot of things [a Ministry of Education representative] sat with us and

said...“Tell me what you need.” We started to explain to her why we need this and why the country needs this [SOPEL training].

Participant No. 4 mentioned that during the program, his goal was: “To gain a better insight on how to become an effective leader and to learn new leadership techniques that can be implemented on a day to day basis at the Ministry of Education” was fulfilled by the program.

Participant No. 9 reported that the program helped in inspiring the participants:

All of the lectures were inspiring regarding leadership, and how the leaders really accomplish their goals and can get high-level outcomes. You really build your knowledge, or experience of knowledge by listening to these people. Sometimes you confirm what you know, what your practice may be. Moreover, sometimes you explore new things you need really to consider in your future practice. So this was so inspiring, informative, and really enriching our expertise, our leadership expertise.

Adding to her/his comments, he mentioned that it was also helpful “to see how much high-level leaders could be graduated from such schools [in Oxford].

The way these schools operate, these schools' vision, and the level of people working at these schools, really all of that reflects our experience, to my experience.”

### **Accommodating Saudi culture in a British training environment.**

The participants did not feel any inconvenience caused by the difference in culture between Saudi Arabia and the UK. In fact, all participants reported unanimously that the SOPEL staff went out of their way to prepare for and accommodate the Saudi participants' needs and preferences. According to Participant No. 6:

I did not feel anything like [discrimination or insensitivity], nothing I can say they should put into consideration in the future. Actually they took into account everything, and I believe that the development played a role in the convenience of the program for us as a Muslim Saudi environment. All aspects were taken into account, so we did not feel any inconvenience or embarrassment in the program at all, it was very comfortable in fact.

The same experience was narrated by Participant No. 9, who did not find any inconveniences:

Although it was...planned and done in a way that fits with our culture, but I cannot tell whether this is from Oxford people or from the Saudi people who were managing this program and were hand by hand [sic] working with Oxford people. I am sure they have given them all the information needed to make our stay comfortable and suitable.

Some of the examples of accommodations made by the SOPEL staff were halal meals, dedicated prayer times, and the accommodation of family members who traveled with their spouses. Spouses were even offered alternative programming during the SOPEL program times, such as cultural visits and historical tours. According to Participant No. 9:

They take care of our food; we have halal people so when you went to the restaurant they try to find these things for us. They also have programs, for the female participants, some of them brought their husbands with them, and their husbands were staying in the hotel. They have a program they took them to the museums, you know, we also appreciated it. They took us to the mall; they provide every room with [prayer materials]. They do all these things, [which] were appreciated.

### **Gender.**

Although the SOPEL program was primarily a professional development initiative, the program also was host to the same dynamics of politics and gender relations which are present in any group effort of this scale. According to Participant No. 9, "It was the first time that [the gender mix] to be 50-50 male and female. They said this was the first time that ever happened." The male and female participants worked on all of the various aspects of the SOPEL program as a unified team, with no activities separated by gender. This is fairly new in Saudi society, where most educational and many professional spheres are separated. As observed by Participant No. 2, "They [the SOPEL staff] wanted open thinking despite the gender. We are all grown up! We [men and women] should be on the same level of leadership. This idea should be there because if you did not [have] this thinking in education, the education will not be developed."

### **Final projects.**

The final phase of the SOPEL program involved the creation of an in-depth final project, which took the form of an initiative and recommendation for policy reform or a new program in the education field. The content of the final projects was tailored to the specific participants' interests and professional spheres, and participants were



assigned to work in groups of five or six individuals (one participant preferred to work alone). These projects required a great deal of time and effort to complete, as they each took the shape of fully-developed policy changes and were created in a manner that was ready to implement, with each step of the process thought through and planned for. Projects were created collaboratively after the Oxford phase of the program, with participants engaging in group Skype discussions and working collectively through online platforms. Each participant contributed something different to the project, such as graphic design, policy recommendations, and writing expertise.

While the participants found the group projects engaging, there were three sub-themes which emerged that hindered the overall effectiveness of the final projects and dampened the perceptions of the SOPEL participants:

- i. The final projects' collaborative nature meant that certain participants' ideas tended to dominate the ideas of others since only one topic could be chosen.

Participants were clear about the collaborative nature of the final projects. Most participants felt that certain participants overrode the ideas of others because only one topic could be chosen for the project. Specifically, Participant No. 7 had a team member leave his group due to a disagreement over the choice of topic. “She said, ‘I’m not convinced with the project,’ and the team replied, ‘So you should leave us.’” Participant No. 3 explained that “I sat with them and convinced each one.” Also, Participant No. 3 explained, “I tried to influence the whole team.” Participant No. 2 stated, “You face many obstacles especially from persons who did not believe in the same objective.” Therefore, it can be reasonably assumed that some participants’ ideas dominated over the ideas of others in their group. The various participants’ conflicting schedules, varying levels of the facility with technology, and perceived roles in the group created certain logistical challenges.

Participant No. 3 stated that, “There was no follow up” and that “Every group worked for itself.” Additionally, Participant No. 1 stated, “So we are [a group of] four, and we need to meet. It is difficult.” Participant No. 9 stated reported, “Some participants were not involved” and added that if she were asked to do it again, she would ask people to commit to work on the project. “We did not have time. It is difficult to do the meeting in my house with my daughter.

The other participants maybe they also have other problems, they are mothers, or they are wives” (Participant 9). Participant No. 2 stated, “There is no place that men and women could meet together except for inside the Tatweer building.” Together, these statements point to conflicting schedules, perceived roles in the group, and logistical challenges that occurred within the study.

ii. The participants were disappointed with the fact that the Ministry of Education only elected to implement a single one of the many projects which were painstakingly created. Further, the “frozen” nature of the projects meant that participants were not authorized to use their projects in other contexts, which added to their frustration.

Participant No. 3 pointed out that “bureaucracy sometimes hinders the projects.” The same participant also stated, “It was a headache; a lot of things were frozen. The development standards for the project was frozen.” Participant No. 1 echoed other participants’ concerns by stating, “The aim was to implement it, but it didn’t happen.” Participant No. 1 continued to state:

Oh it’s a bad experience, because, as I have mentioned before in a previous question, answering a previous question, I mentioned that

we were promised that we are going to present our final...to present our project in front of key people of ministry of education and other ministries, ministry of education and deciding budgets. As well as to some key people from universities. So that they judge the projects, and then one of the projects will win, and then that project will be supported by the budget, of which this project have identified for implementation. This is a fancy idea, but it was not applied, actually. That's the...that's the frustration. What happened is that we presented our project in front of the minister of medication, and it was just a simple presentation. Even though the people there were not so interested in the presentation itself as much as just attending...attending it as a ceremony attendance. For example, there was no discussion of this presentations. And, of course, there was no judgment, no feedback, and there were no nomination for the final or winner project. So it was just a celebration.

To conclude, the participants all voiced that they were disappointed and frustrated with the dynamics of the final projects. Although each of the final projects focused on a different field or

professional sphere, these three themes appeared across the board and described sentiments shared by all the participants.

### **Theme Two**

The SOPEL program created substantial improvements to the professional skills of the participants, as well as to their personal lives. These benefits form the basis for Theme Two. Furthermore, participants reported that there were networking benefits experienced from the SOPEL program because of the opportunity to interact with fellow participants.

Participant No. 1 stated:

This exam helped me to explore some characteristics in my personality. Of course, it's about your leadership personality, which I need to look at, improve, or maybe change, which is – which applies to everybody. Which you don't know yourself, unless the other reflect it to you. It's uneasy to have the others input about yourself, but in a sort of examination, which is administered anonymously, and analyzed by experts, you will really benefit a lot, and you trust this sort of feedback. The second thing we benefitted from, or I benefitted from personally, is the inspiring lectures, which were introduced to us by some CEOs, or expert people of ministers of education, or vice ministers of education. That was the vice minister of education, and

CEO of [Zane] Company, Mr. [Rabarak] from Kuwait. And there were also another one. All of these three lectures were inspiring in terms of leadership, and how the leaders really accomplish their goals, and can really get high-level outcomes. You really build your knowledge or experience of knowledge by listening to these people. Sometimes you confirm what you know, what your practice may be. And sometimes you explore new things you need really to consider in your future practice. So this was so inspiring, informative, and really enriching to our expertise, our leadership expertise.

Coding analysis from the final projects found that the program was beneficial to their professional performance. It is interesting to note that the benefits identified by the participants in the interviews were generally described, when compared with the quality of their final project reports, they show remarkable professional quality—the reports are results based, used solid quantifiable indicators, and a strong results-based framework. However, it is not clear how much of it was the result of their training and how much can be attributed to their prior competence levels. The focused coding categories in the final project details showed that communication for the final project, final project presentation, initiative for the final project, inspiration for the final project, the motivation for the final project, and priorities were major focused coding

categories. Table 3 summarizes the participant sources and the references coded from the transcriptions of interviews.

Table 3

*Professional Skills and Personal Lives*

Codes	Sources	References
Professional Improvements	4	4
Personal Improvements	8	9

**Professional improvements.**

Professional improvements was one of the benefits of the SOPEL program. Participant No. 3 supported the claim that the participants' job performance became more efficient because of the SOPEL program:

I have twenty one workers here in Tatweer, and they worked in a great part of the program.... [As a result of SOPEL] we have worked with organizations in the USA, and I am the manager of [a new] project designed to improve quality of education.

Participant No. 7 noted, "Changing [other educators'] ideas is faster [as a result of SOPEL]." He believed that the SOPEL program allowed them to become critical thinkers in applying their knowledge to their profession. This is important

because the SOPEL program indeed aimed at becoming more practical than theoretical.

The SOPEL program also helped ensure that the participants worked collaboratively with each other. Participant No. 4 also mentioned that:

In the final stage of the program, we worked as a team in our final project. We applied the spirit of leadership; we realized as a team all participatory responsibility in accomplishing our project beyond all odds. We supported and helped each other to complete our tasks.

Networking with each other as well as with representatives at Oxford was unanimously described to be of great professional utility for the participants. Making contacts was important, especially after the program ended, to ensure continued relationships and professional networking. Despite being in a foreign country, the possibility of having equally competent peers was the greatest asset, for it allowed the participants to maximize the benefits of the SOPEL program. Participant No. 7 described this as follows:

However, the most networking benefit was with my peers, or the trainees, the leaders from – the educational leaders from Saudi Arabia. Moreover, I wished really that this was extended to meet



other educational leaders in the same location, that could have been much better, but it went this way, and I think this is good enough. Furthermore, it was one of the benefits I experienced by going to Oxford.

### **Personal improvements.**

The SOPEL program also served as a vehicle for personal self-improvement in both a professional and outside-of-work context. According to Participant No. 4, "The program will pave the way to me personally to switch from my administrative role to leadership management role." Participant No. 8 simply stated: "I think this is a good experience, you learn." According to Participant No. 1, the program had long-term personal impacts:

There were many activities which made us happy like visiting Oxford University, where at the end we made a debate on the highest level, we entered the university, put on robes and performed a scene. We experienced how to make a debate on one subject; that was on whether you are with or against private higher education in Saudi Arabia; even you are the one who proposes [sic] the subject. You should be present with a team, and who will be with you three against your three [opponents]. [The programming] makes you

evaluate your skills—this is the first thing and most important result; and also makes you know your points of weakness and work on them. Also, there was cooperation between me and [the other SOPEL] delegates.

It can be said that the program helped the participants to evaluate their current skills and inspired them to become more efficient in developing their skills more. Participant No. 2 believed that the program would help public education to be based on genuine leadership: “I went to them because there were projects in the public education - it is the leadership despite the methodology...and now I wish to make [my field] stronger.”

The participants of the SOPEL program had different purposes and reasons behind joining the program. Despite the difference in their aspirations and goals, it cannot be denied that the SOPEL program was instrumental in developing their leadership skills. The SOPEL program also contributed to the development of the personal introspection and development of the participants. According to Participant No. 9:

The most important item of it, from my appraisal as attesting specialist, was the high level of the psychologist who came to explain to us these findings. Without him being really - having this high ability and high availability, and capacity to speak out, and did

elaborate on our trades, and the finding released or revealed by this examination. We could have never benefitted as we have experienced. So his feedback was mature, full of experience, enriching, and reflected really world-class level. So in this—in this term, I see that this exercise was the most beneficial part of the course to me.

In summary, Theme Two highlighted the substantial improvements that the participants reported to their professional skills, and also to their personal lives, as a result of joining the SOPEL program. Additionally, participants voiced their satisfaction in the opportunity to work in groups, interact with fellow participants, and building professional network relationships.

Chapter 3 described the evolution of coding of the interview transcripts which gave birth to the HORSE framework, built from what emerged as the most important topics to the participants, resulting from their overall SOPEL experience. There are five categories that emerged from the final stage of focused coding. They became the five themes of the HORSE framework, and include Have Separate Initiatives to Train Leaders and Managers, Open up Opportunities for All Candidates'

Success, Reduce Hurdles to Success and Maximize Potential, Select Participants Carefully, and Evaluate Outcomes Using a Third Party Quality Control Organization. The HORSE network, as it relates to developing leadership, is discussed in the next section.

### **The HORSE Framework of Leadership Program Development**

The HORSE framework of leadership development was cultured from an extensive review of the literature, along with firsthand data from the interviews with SOPEL participants and an analysis of their final projects. Using the metaphor of horse racing, a favorite pastime in many countries including Saudi Arabia, it describes some basic principles to make the leadership training experiences of participants more valuable for all people and organizations involved. Although not a comprehensive theory by any means, nor one which is universally applicable, the HORSE framework serves to illustrate and offer insight into some patterns which emerged from the SOPEL data and may be of use to future leadership development initiatives both in Saudi Arabia and beyond.

The HORSE framework contains five different elements, designed to help creators and executors of leadership training programs to conceptualize and apply best practices to their work. Each of the steps in the framework corresponds to concrete ideas articulated by the SOPEL participants or is drawn from their final

projects, which illuminate the core elements that help leadership programs succeed. The elements of the HORSE framework are:

H - have separate initiatives to train leaders and managers

O - open up opportunities for all candidates' success

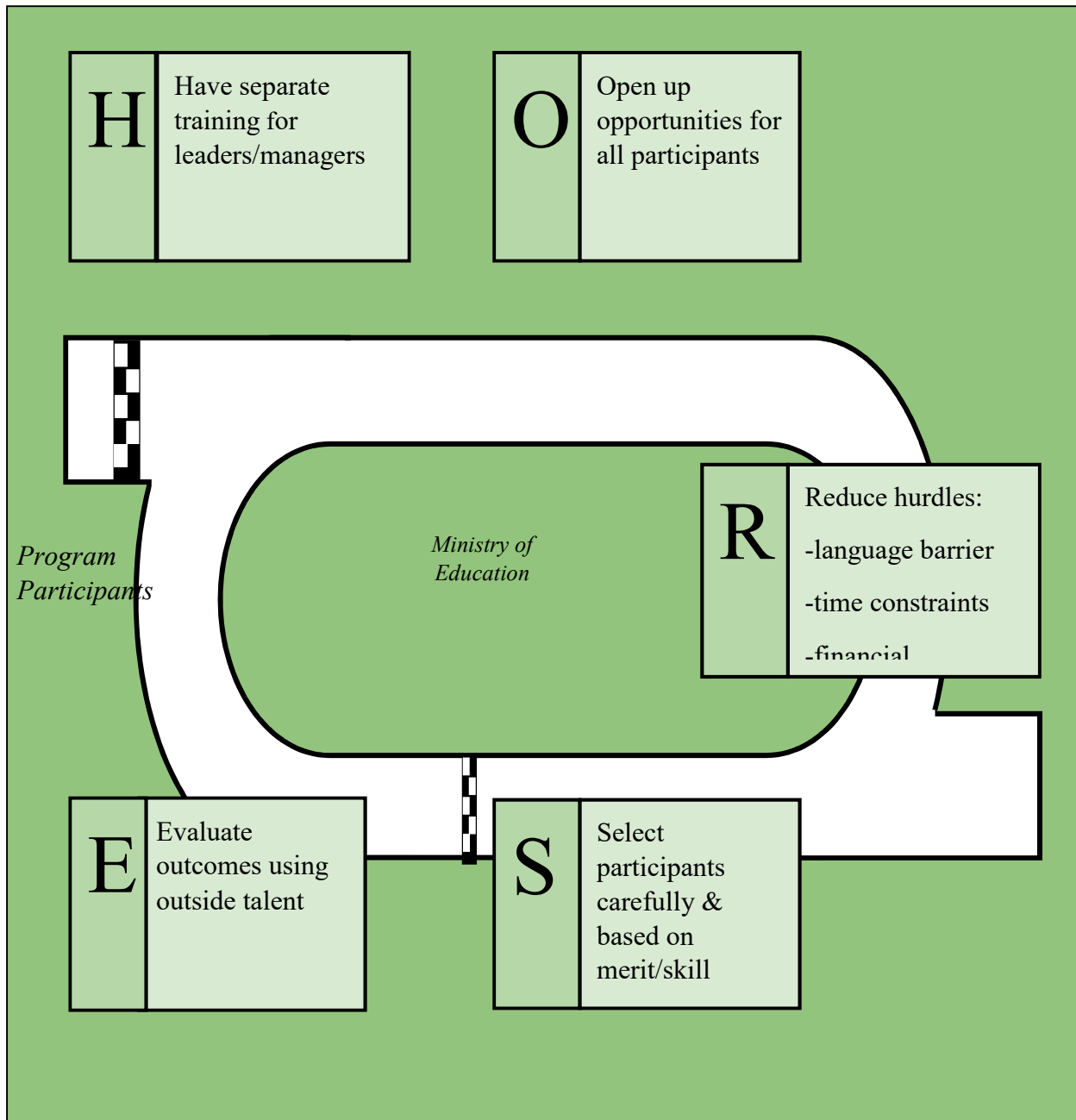
R - reduce hurdles to success and maximize potential (types of hurdles include language, logistics, and administration)

S - select participants carefully

E - evaluate outcomes using a third party quality control organization.

A visual guide to the HORSE framework is provided to help represent the importance of these different components of building leadership programs (see Figure 1). The metaphor of a horse race dovetails nicely with the principles of developing leadership: the leaders' natural drive to succeed and perform, the need for structure and careful observation of participant performance, the possibility of gatekeeping and of erecting hurdles to slow down performance, and the triumph of successfully developing leaders and watching them blossom.

Figure 1. The HORSE Framework for Leadership Program Development



Therefore, the HORSE framework emerged organically from an analysis of the SOPEL participant data, and its five concepts presented in this section to illustrate points of administrative intervention in the development of leadership programs. These five concepts serve to illuminate areas for the improvement of leadership program development and to enlighten program developers as to the desires and needs of program participants. The goal of this framework was to serve as a tool for future program development, to give insight into the conditions which allow leaders to grow and flourish, and to promote greater understanding of what works and what causes difficulties for participants in leadership programming.

### **Connecting Emerging Themes to the HORSE Framework**

The themes found in this study revolve around perceptions of experiences, cultural implications, and professional improvement and personal edification. These themes, along with the aforementioned codes, allow well-researched answers to my research questions. All participants found the program to be beneficial and a lasting impact was made due to the program's efficacy. The connection between all of the elements is that the SOPEL program resulted in improved performance and leadership abilities, as well as new perspectives. The

correspondence of the codes, elements of the HORSE framework, and themes are charted in Table 4, and explained individually in the following discussion.

Table 4

*Correspondence of Codes with Framework*

Codes	Element of Framework	Themes
Benefits	H	1 & 2
Cultural Sensitivity	R	1
Final Project Details	E	2
Participant Outcomes	E	2
Participant Selection	S	1
Reduce Hurdles	R	1
Training Methodology	O	1 & 2

**H - Have separate initiatives to train leaders and managers.**

The SOPEL participants described how the programming at SOPEL encouraged the dynamic, charismatic kind of leadership, while at home in Saudi Arabia the practical expectations of the participants more closely resembled those of a manager profile. Participants No. 6 and No. 7 both held jobs which specifically named them as managers, and yet they struggled to conceptualize a



way in which they could fulfill all their current responsibilities while also injecting leadership qualities learned in SOPEL into their work. Participant No. 9 explained that there was something of a disconnect between what the SOPEL program trained its participants for and what they would need to do to succeed in their positions back home:

As much as they should have been introduced to the Saudi managerial culture, this was a leadership program. They could have incorporated a lot of [prior and existing] research about what's lacking in leadership in Saudi Arabia, what problems we suffer in Saudi Arabia [in the field of leadership]. To me, this was not there [at SOPEL]. I think there were some [deficits] in this area.

This participant felt frustrated because of the conflation of the terms *leadership* and *management*, especially with regard to applying strategies learned in the UK back in Saudi Arabia. Sh/e noted, "They have to get information [about] the leadership culture of Saudi Arabia regarding management and the leadership styles in the Saudi institutions, which I am sure they didn't do."

### **O - Open up opportunities for all candidates' success.**

The SOPEL program is just a small example of a wave of new initiatives and programs which have been recently executed in Saudi Arabia, all directed

toward the enrichment and betterment of the nation and the security of its future. These programs have attracted many bright, enthusiastic candidates, who have freely shared their ideas and articulated their visions for the good of their colleagues and future generations. However, many of these participants have been confronted with unexpected resistance, obstacles, or neglect from the organizations which solicited their input in the first place. Regrettably, the SOPEL program serves as an example of this issue, which resulted in a great deal of frustration and dissatisfaction from its participants.

The main area where this conflict reared its head was in the completion and implementation of the final projects, which required a great effort on the part of each group of SOPEL participants. These projects took the form of a fully-developed policy initiative, new educational program, or training. The SOPEL participants engaged in in-depth research, planning, collaborative writing and revision, and presentation of their work to complete the requirements of the SOPEL program. The goal of this segment of the program was first to test their knowledge as a result of the program, and second to create programs and policies that could be implemented back in Saudi Arabia, and participants were told that a portion of their projects would be implemented by the Ministry of Education. However, this unfortunately did not come to fruition. Only one of the participants' projects was selected to be implemented, and the participant freely

admits that this implementation was more a result of social connections and personal lobbying than any superiority to the other participants' work. The other participants were, to be polite, not pleased with this outcome. Participant No. 2 describes her/his sentiments as follows:

A lot of things were frozen. [A certain group's] project was frozen now.

Imagine you have the project [completed and ready to implement] and 21 experts in the project, 21 curriculum experts, and 25 experts. All these are available, and we suffered to make these projects.

Participant No. 2's frustration lay in the Saudi Ministry of Education's "freezing" of projects after their completion. Rather than selecting a large chunk of the projects, as the participants were told beforehand, the Ministry only selected one, and the rest of the projects were simply ignored. Despite the equal investment of time and energy in their creation, the projects—and thus the participants who created them—were unable to make a meaningful impact on the Saudi educational system.

Participant No. 6 felt deprived when her/his project was not accepted because "they promised us, God willing, that it will be implemented." Sh/e continued to elaborate her/his sentiments that

These programs are of value and made by leaders who have the experience and knowledge and enthusiasm for the development of education. They

worked hard on these programs. Though if we applied for the implementation of these programs, it would have represented a quantum leap in education.

### **R - Reduce hurdles to success and maximize potential.**

The participants in the SOPEL program were truly “chomping at the bit” to share their work and to make an impact in their fields, but they encountered several stumbling blocks in the process of attending and completing the program’s requirements. These hurdles hindered their progress, diminished the potential of their growth at SOPEL, and ultimately left a sour taste in many participants’ mouths. What follows is an elaboration of some of the more commonly perceived hurdles which presented themselves in the SOPEL participant interviews.

Despite the rise in English as a language of business and education in Saudi Arabia, many Saudis are much more comfortable using Arabic to share their thoughts and ideas. English is introduced to Saudi students at a relatively young age, but fluency and native-level proficiency are not common. British English used to be the standard variety taught in Saudi Arabia, but this has since come into competition with American English. When transported out of their normal environment and placed into the context of a British program at a British,

English-speaking university full of native speakers, many of the SOPEL participants reported difficulties with the language both in and outside of the program. Some participants, such as Participant No. 2, identified feelings of frustration, confusion, and vulnerability in the program when it comes to language:

I have the content [knowledge] and [another team member] has the language....Also, [another participant] is a specialist in English but I didn't study it, and so they are better than me in English as they did study it....I have the language and know the country better because I work with [other Gulf countries who use English as a lingua franca], but not with academic books written in the English language, it [English] is the language of education....Thanks Allah, we presented our project academically, and it was good.

It is clear from this quote that, as a single person, Participant No. 2 would not have been able to reap the benefits of the SOPEL program. Only in the context of working with others on the group project were they able to come up with a viable outcome. While collaboration and a team spirit is certainly something that the SOPEL staff would wish to foster among the participants, a collaboration born of frustration and inability to understand directions is not

desirable. Further, language skills in English were an unspoken prerequisite for participation in the SOPEL program, not an explicit focus of its programming. Language training was not included in the programming, so there was little way to mitigate the difficulties of those participants with language challenges. Participant No. 2 also described that they were not the only one struggling with the language: “[Some of] the [SOPEL program] participants’ grasp of language was poor. In my opinion, some of them do not have [the English language skills] to speak up and advocate for themselves.”

The outcome of having such a wide range of English proficiency levels among the SOPEL participants was, according to interview data, that the participants relied heavily on Arabic during most of their time at Oxford. According to Participant No. 5, the participants used Arabic for informal group work as well as for conversation in between activities: “They talk to each other in Arabic and of course, can discuss ideas within the group also in Arabic.” Further, most of the writing done during the two-week period in Oxford was for the participants’ purposes and was not evaluated by the SOPEL staff or submitted for review. This means that this informal writing and note-taking could have been done entirely in Arabic or in a mix of Arabic and English that would not be sufficiently academic for an academic publication. While participants were able

to translate their ideas for discussion with SOPEL staff orally, there was a distinct disconnect reported between these on-the-fly translations and the lasting learning experienced by the participants. As Participant No. 5 stated, “The main reason behind silence and weak interaction from the part of some participants is the language barrier.” This participant further remarked that the SOPEL participants were selected based on the Oxford interviewer’s interpretation of their English skills being “good” or not. There is no clear way to qualify what constitutes “good English,” and no official test scores or language evaluations were used to select the SOPEL participants.

### **S - Select participants carefully.**

Another difficulty reported by the SOPEL participants was the perception that some of the program participants were better-suited and better-equipped for the programming and requirements of SOPEL than others. The participants’ data demonstrate a perception that the selection criteria for the program were not very clear, and that there was more emphasis put on social connections and logistical convenience than on a person’s expertise and skills. This, the participants reported, reduced the overall efficiency of the whole group and reduced the potential of the SOPEL program to have a lasting impact on all participants. On the surface, the list of program participants appears to be a carefully curated one;

Participant No. 5 reported that the method for selection was “a long one,” and that the Oxford staff and Ministry officials created “a full profile about every candidate and then held interviews with them” prior to selection. Participant No. 6 also reported being told that, “The training department has specific controls whereby members can be nominated to enroll in the program.”

However, there is some debate on whether these plans and procedures resulted in the most optimally-qualified candidates being chosen for the SOPEL program. As discussed earlier, regrets were expressed by some participants that the English proficiency of all candidates was not tested or vetted before the SOPEL program began. Additionally, some participants reported varying levels of engagement in program content during SOPEL, especially during activities which required individual writing, reflection, or complex problem-solving. Finally, the fact that some of the SOPEL participants were administrators overseeing the program rather than directly involved in the program caused a slight disconnect in what was expected of all participants. Ultimately, the participants’ perceptions regarding the selection process for collecting and screening participants in the SOPEL program were that it could have been more rigorous and selective. Of course, none of the participants identified themselves as individuals who might not have been optimally-suited for the program.



### **E - Evaluate outcomes using a third party quality control organization.**

As discussed in Chapter 2, the Saudi Ministry of Education places a high value on measurable outcomes and concrete results. Many of its recent programs began with grand ideas and visions, but failed to satisfy this basic obligation of any professional development program. While it is indeed difficult to demonstrate the direct effects of leadership on students, employees, or other constituents, as Leithwood and Levin (2008) describe in detail, the need to extrapolate these effects is pressing. The results-driven attitude of the Ministry of Education would seem to suggest that rigorous evaluations of programs would be compulsory; however, no evaluation procedures besides this study have been taken towards the SOPEL program at all. For such a costly and involved initiative, it seems dissonant with the Ministry's agenda to neglect this essential closing step in the orchestration of one of their programs. Rather than merely executing the program and moving on, it is in the best interests of the Ministry and the country, in general, to reflect on the impact of its programs. Evaluation serves the important purpose of providing hindsight and guiding future initiatives, while also preserving a record of best (and suboptimal) practices for program creators. Considering the state-driven nature of Saudi education, it would be most natural for the Ministry to choose an internal evaluator to conduct an evaluation

of SOPEL or a similar program, more out of habit and convenience than evidence that this practice is preferable. However, as Russ-Eft and Preskill (2011) explain, employing an evaluator or evaluation team outside of the organization provides the most accurate and unbiased results. Based on participant data, the need for authentic, unbiased evaluation of the SOPEL program's content and participant performance is evident.

### **Summary**

It is clear from the data collected that the SOPEL program had a lasting impact on participants and that its effects were, for the most part, largely positive. The participants each had slightly different experiences with the SOPEL program, but their enjoyment of the teamwork, lectures, and visits speaks volumes about the overall quality of the program, as does the SOPEL staff's thorough efforts to accommodate cultural differences and provide rich programming. While the final projects were a source of frustration for most of the participants, this only serves to demonstrate how much genuine passion and desire to achieve each of them brought to the SOPEL table. Overall, despite a few opportunities for improvement, it seems that the participant's experiences were informative, empowering, and enjoyable.

## **CHAPTER V: Discussion**

The general perceptions of the SOPEL participants were that the first and second goals were met by the SOPEL program, with the perceived degree of success varying from participant to participant. Because the manifestations of processes such as modernization and economic improvement are difficult to measure quantitatively, the affirmation that the first goal was met rests on the claims of participants. However, it is likely that the Tatweer Company, by the principles of the Saudi 2030 Vision program, will engage in efforts to measure the economic and technological progress of the education system, including the SOPEL program. Participants' claims that they were exposed to new technologies and practices through SOPEL is sufficient to answer this research question for the time being.

Unfortunately, it was the overall opinion of the participants that the third goal was not fully met, especially about the final projects, and that this could have been handled differently in a manner that would have been more empowering and positive for the participants. Participants expressed a broad range of concerns with the final project process, from poor communication to a lack of accountability or usefulness of the projects compared to what was initially offered. The ability of participants to apply their knowledge was diminished by the execution of the project phase, but participants still attested that they were

able to apply what they learned in SOPEL to their everyday working environments.

This chapter focuses on developing and articulating a unified framework describing leadership development based on the data collected from both the SOPEL participant interviews and final projects. I discuss how the different sources of data had shared themes and patterns which formed a single, cohesive scheme. This framework, called the HORSE framework, provides a system around which to examine the effectiveness of leadership development programs, to address possible challenges and hurdles to their success, and to empower future leaders to reach their highest potential. Aspects of this framework are grounded in the commonalities and themes which emerged from a careful coding of the data.

Overall, the results of the collected data demonstrate that the SOPEL program was well received and enjoyed by the participants. Despite their perceptions that the SOPEL program staff made their best efforts to provide fruitful program content, a suitable environment for learning, informative speakers, and cultural accommodations, the participants reported that the effects of the SOPEL program did not have the potency they expected. There are many possible causes for this issue; some of them are preventable by the Ministry of

Education, and some are not. However, the SOPEL participants had some recommendations on how to make the SOPEL experience and others like it even more powerful and positive.

As described in earlier chapters, the Ministry of Education has a few priorities which are common knowledge in Saudi Arabia. First, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the need to evolve economically beyond the lifespan of the country's oil reserves is a definite impetus to building leadership. Second, the recent changes in regime combined with regional conflicts have created a general culture of "tightening the belt" on government spending and made it even more important for programs to prove their efficacy. Third, Saudi Arabia's delicate diplomatic role as a major trading partner with many powerful nations make it necessary for the country to train strong leaders who will maintain its public role and keep order. Finally, Saudi Arabia's desire to be a powerful global leader in business, education, and politics requires that it be judicious about the programs it chooses to fund and support.

Perhaps nowhere is this agenda more evident than in the Saudi 2030 Vision, a comprehensive set of reforms including many changes to educational policy. The Saudi Vision 2030 embodies the Saudi government's cognizance of the severity of the next turn of its economic wheel and its commitment to

sustaining a high quality of life for its people by preparing adequately for these changes. The goals of the vision and the overarching principles of the current regime have guided the present exploratory qualitative study and created a guiding foundation which became the HORSE framework.

As discussed in earlier chapters, the HORSE framework of leadership program development describes some basic principles—gleaned from an extensive review of the literature, and firsthand data from the interviews with SOPEL participants and their final projects—intended to make the leadership training experiences of participants more valuable for all people and organizations involved. The five elements of this framework were designed to guide those charged with the planning and executing of effective leadership training programs in Saudi Arabia.

### **Distinguishing Between Leadership and Management in the Sphere of Education**

Leaders are defined in the literature as those who frame and define the reality for others, based on their experience, in a way that forms a viable basis for action; they provide focus for new attention. In formal organizations such right to provide meaning is institutionalized in hierarchical structures (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). The significance of educational leadership and management has been discussed in the literature; and there is a perspective in academia which

argues that educational leadership is a field separate from general leadership. However, most principals are not aware of whether they are leading or managing; they are simply carrying out their duties (Bush, 2007). That is why it is very important to distinguish between leadership and management.

According to Leithwood and Levin (2005) leadership is a type of role which involves “direction setting and influence” (p. 14). This type of position is best suited for someone dynamic and charismatic, who is willing to take risks and even break rules if necessary, in order to help their organization improve and evolve. The characteristics of a good leader include daring, boldness, lack of fear of defying convention, and a magnetism which can convince people to “buy in” emotionally to their agenda. However, these traits are not supportive of the hierarchical structures and relationships which dominate most organizations’ culture. Someone who is a good leader may be focused on future initiatives, exciting new opportunities, or the task of recruiting and evangelizing for their cause. This person may not make time or have energy for mundane tasks such as payroll, employee reviews, scheduling, or communicating effectively with other branches of the organization.

Leadership is associated with change, while management is about maintenance of activities (Bush, 2007). Rather, these duties fall under Leithwood and Levin’s (2005) idea of management, which is generally focused on

maintaining the status quo, i.e., “coordination, planning, monitoring, and distribution of resources” (p. 14). To a charismatic leader, these tasks seem boring and dull. However, people who excel at managing and who are perfectly happy in a maintenance role may fall utterly short when it comes to leading. Their skills in organization, coordinating, communicating, and making sure all pieces of the organization fit together smoothly, may go to waste or be ignored if they are placed in a leadership role. Unfortunately, many administrators (especially in education) are expected to perform a bizarre combination of these two conflicting roles, which results in frustration and inefficiency. Leithwood and Levin (2005) suggest that organizations let leaders be leaders and let managers be managers in separate but complementary spheres.

When it comes to creating educational leadership training programs, the metaphor of the horse race is helpful in deciding how best to meet the needs of participants in these programs. Are they race horses - trained to be dynamic leaders who bring change and vision to their work—or workhorses—taught to maintain the status quo, do the heavy lifting of distributing resources and coordinating daily activities, without questioning authority or taking risks? It is impossible for one type of program to fit both of these professional profiles. Much of the confusion in this area results from the conflation of management with leadership and vice versa.



Because of the hierarchical nature of the education system in Saudi Arabia and the high power distance and uncertainty avoidance as described in Chapter 2, the archetype of a driven, charismatic, risk-taking leader does not seem like a welcome addition to a team of Saudi educational leaders (Hussain, 2013). In fact, as Thomas (2007) describes, resistance to these kinds of personalities in educational reform is well-documented.

While Saudi Arabia may be a nation which culturally favors “workhorses” over “racehorses,” the country is also at a historic turning point in its development, especially in the education sector. With changing economic fortunes, a young population, and a recent change in regime, the cultural desire for dynamic leadership and change is at a historic high. Even though this model of leadership is not traditional, it may be accepted that this archetype is the key to the future of the nation. Perhaps this is what the SOPEL program aimed to impart - that management alone is not enough to foster the long-term survival of a nation.

### **Implications for Saudi Arabia’s Education System**

Findings from this study indicate that the experiences of the participants in a leadership program were a mix of positive and negative perceptions and outcomes. Participants had experience with management; through SOPEL

program they gained exposure to and training in leadership. Participants demonstrated a willingness to work and a drive to succeed but met with unexpected obstacles during their experiences which hindered the effectiveness of the program. The findings of this study indicate that participants were also frustrated by the conflation of leadership with management training initiatives and that deliverables from the program were rendered moot after administrative changes deprived them of the ability to deliver and implement. The participant data suggests that leadership training programs could be improved by altering some of these friction points. This can have significant implications for the future of educational leadership in KSA. It is yet to be seen if this experience will have a transformative effect in the educational sector or not, and in which direction. Future research can explore this aspect.

Future leadership training programs should be carefully crafted based on the best practices observed in former programs, both regionally and abroad (using data from the Oxford phase of SOPEL would be helpful). Taking care to design training which distinctly addresses managerial and leadership responsibilities separately, training content should be realistic in its scope and should not attempt to do too much in a single instance or timeframe. Participants in future training should be selected carefully based on their merits, with participants stratified into groups based on their language proficiency as well as their experience to ensure

efficiency for all. Finally, employing third-party evaluators to make sure that training is proceeding beneficially and that all activities meet the desired criteria is essential to future success.

### **Global Implications**

Findings from this study suggest some universal themes about human motivation and development. As Leithwood and Levin (2005) explain in their framework, leadership can act as a catalyst to “unleash” the potential for learning and improvement (p. 3). Among leaders themselves, the participant data suggests that people in leadership training programs perform best when they feel that their work has a purpose and application in their field. When this sense of purpose and application is removed, there is a negative correlation between motivation, learning, and perceived usefulness of the program. For Saudis, this can be equated with the Quranic imperative to share the gift of knowledge with the world, and to become “a useful member of society” (Shah, 2006, p. 367). For others, a sense of purpose may not carry spiritual significance but is nonetheless an essential component for human well-being. Creating leadership programs which enhance a participants’ sense of purpose and make effective use of their time is a critical takeaway from this research endeavor.

Additionally, the findings suggest that language mastery is an important prerequisite to leadership training in a foreign environment. Language training may not be as integral an issue in primarily English-speaking countries, but anywhere that English is a language of instruction and business but not necessarily a mother tongue for its citizens must consider this issue. Programs must offer training in English for those whose English proficiency is limited—either training must be made linguistically accessible in the national language or dialect, or the selection of participants must be limited to those who can function at the linguistic level of the content. As Chew (2010) states most elegantly, “a language must be at the service of the people who use it” (p. 67). Future training initiatives in any locale will benefit from addressing this issue practically.

Finally, the findings suggest that careful vetting of program participants and applicants can vastly increase (or decrease, if it is not performed) the efficiency of a leadership training program. Leithwood and Levin (2005) insist that future leadership programs select their participants based on criteria which are supported by research data, for the sake of efficiency and cost-effectiveness (p. 5). Participant data from this research endeavor strongly support the position that leadership training programs be extremely selective in choosing participants who are similarly qualified, who are capable of working together logistically and stylistically, and who can carry out all the objectives of the program without

sacrificing quality of work due to external domestic, professional, or administrative commitments.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study was limited to only one program conducted by Tatweer, which is a vast program with many branches and initiatives under its umbrella. The body of research on Saudi educational leadership and professional development is still growing, and much more work is needed to explore and enrich the discourse in this field. As evaluation becomes more rigorous and more frequently mandatory, careful attention will be directed at programs such as SOPEL to determine whether they merit the required investment of time, finances, and personnel with proportion to their outcomes and success. The literature on educational leadership must be expanded to help the Saudi Ministry of Education make more informed decision about future initiatives in education and training.

### **Final Thoughts**

When I set out to perform this research, I was not expecting to receive such willing and rich feedback from the participants. I am genuinely grateful to all those who helped me to fill in the blanks about the SOPEL program and to illuminate what their experiences were really like. Although I only surveyed a fraction of the total population of participants, I feel that I was privileged to

witness a wide range of perspectives on the program and its inner workings. This experience also pushed me as a researcher and required me to be courageous in surmounting certain cultural obstacles, such as interviewing male participants by myself. The experience was gratifying. I also feel now more than ever that the future of Saudi education lies in both incorporating more mobile and online initiatives and in reaching out more readily to our nation's young people. We must make programs like SOPEL more selective but also more accessible to young professionals to ensure the continued progress and success of our country.

**APPENDICES**

**Appendix A: Letter of Permission**

Access to Research Site/Participants

# EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN SAUDI ARABIA

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30 DEC 2014



Date: 12/28/2014  
Tatweer Company for Educational Services (T4edu)  
P.O. Box 281128, Riyadh 11437  
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.  
Email: Mohammed AL-Zaghibi <malzaghibi@t4edu.com>  
Phone: 966 2762226

To whom it may concern,

I, Dr. Mohammed AL-Zaghibi (T4edu CEO), hereby authorizes Azizah Alogali of the University of North Dakota to conduct a research study in pursuit of her Doctoral Degree in Educational Leadership during the 2014-2015 academic year. The study will focus on the Saudi Oxford Program for Educational Leadership, also known as SOPEL, and its execution and lasting effects. Mrs. Alogali has our full permission to speak with participants in the SOPEL program, other relevant faculty and staff, to collect data through interviews, surveys, reviewing records, and any other procedures relevant to her focus. Mrs. Alogali may use this information to craft her dissertation, and has our full permission to publish it in any academic context she sees fit.

We at T4edu understand that it is extremely important to protect the privacy and identities of our scholars. Mrs. Alogali has assured us that she is taking all the necessary steps to preserve the anonymity of her study subjects, and we trust that she will honor their right to privacy and protection. We also understand that some individuals who are interviewed or consulted may choose to provide their identities to be published in the dissertation, and give Mrs. Alogali license to identify these individuals in her work, provided that they have given adequate written consent.

If any of these terms need to be revised, we will be happy to provide an updated letter of permission, and we will remain in contact with Mrs. Alogali throughout the research process.

Sincerely,

Dr. Mohammed AL-Zaghibi, CEO

T4EDU.COM



**Appendix B: Letter of Agreement/Consent Form**

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

TITLE: [SOPEL Project Experience Evaluation]

PROJECT DIRECTOR: [Azizah Alogali]

PHONE # [330-689-8601]

DEPARTMENT: [Educational Leadership]

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH:

A person who is to participate in the research must give his or her informed consent for such participation. This consent must be based on an understanding of the nature and risks of the research. This document provides information that is important for this understanding. Research projects include only subjects who choose to take part. Please take your time in making your decision as to whether to participate. If you have questions at any time, please ask.

## EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN SAUDI ARABIA

### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

You are invited to be in a research study about the Saudi Oxford Program for Educational Leadership (SOPEL) because you were one of the fortunate individuals to be chosen to participate in the SOPEL program.

The purpose of this research study is to evaluate your experiences in the SOPEL program and the extent to which you perceive that the program has affected your professional development.

### HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL PARTICIPATE?

Approximately 40 people will take part in this study via the University of North Dakota. The research will be conducted online over the telephone or Skype.

### HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THIS STUDY?

Your participation in the study may last two to three months but will require a minimal investment of time. You will be asked to complete a telephone or Skype

## EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN SAUDI ARABIA

interview based on your choice, and to submit your SOPEL final project for analysis.

### WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY?

The study will begin when all subjects' consent forms are gathered.

You will then be notified if you have been selected to participate in the interview portion of the study. You will, then, be given a date for your interview and you will be allowed to select the interview mode – Skype or telephone. Interviews will last 45-60 minutes. You will only be asked to participate in one interview – there will be a follow-up email message, but no follow-up interview. You will be given a copy of the transcript of your interview, as well as a copy of the finished dissertation if desired when it is made available.

When answering the interview questions, please be advised that you need not answer any questions you do not feel comfortable responding to. You may skip questions as needed, but please be aware that responding to the interview as thoroughly as possible helps us obtain the best data for analysis.

### WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THE STUDY?

There are risks inherent in any research study, although the risks of this study are extremely minimal. We at UND will do everything possible to protect the privacy and anonymity of your responses to the interview. However, when conducting a study with such a small population as the SOPEL program, it is always possible that someone may recognize your writing or your words as published in the study, even when your name and information are withheld. Your right to privacy is extremely important to us, but there is always a slight risk.

### WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?

You may benefit personally from being in this study. However, we also hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study because it will help the Saudi Ministry of Education make the best possible decisions about choosing which educational programs to implement in the future.

### WILL IT COST ME ANYTHING TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

You will not have any costs for being in this research study except your time.

### WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?

## EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN SAUDI ARABIA

You will not be paid for being in this research study.

### WHO IS FUNDING THE STUDY?

The University of North Dakota and the research team are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

### CONFIDENTIALITY

The records of this study will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. In any report about this study that might be published, you will not be identified.

Your study record may be reviewed by Government agencies, the UND Research Development and Compliance office, and the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board.

Any information that is obtained in this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by limiting all access to participant emails, Skype or email addresses, and interview audio and transcripts

## EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN SAUDI ARABIA

to the research director alone. If data is submitted to another individual for coding purposes, your name will not be included.

If we write a report or article about this study, we will describe the study results in a summarized manner so that you cannot be identified.

You will have the right to review the transcript of your interview and request that any part of it be removed before analysis. Only the research advisor, the researcher, and a consultant will have access to your interview data unless it is submitted to a transcription facility, in which case your name will be omitted. Data will be used for educational purposes only. After three years, all data will be erased.

### IS THIS STUDY VOLUNTARY?

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of North Dakota.

If you decide to leave the study early, we ask that you contact the study coordinator as soon as possible.

## CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

The researcher conducting this study is Azizah Alogali. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research later, please contact

Azizah Alogali:

Telephone: (917) 293-7581

Email: [azizah.alogali@gmail.com](mailto:azizah.alogali@gmail.com)

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact The University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279.

- You may also call this number about any problems, complaints, or concerns you have about this research study.
- You may also call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone who is independent of the research team.

- General information about being a research subject can be found by clicking “Information for Research Participants” on the website:  
<http://und.edu/research/resources/human-subjects/research-participants.cfm>

*[If applicable]* I give consent to be audiotaped during this study.

Please initial:        ☐ Yes        ☐ No

*[If applicable]* I give consent to be videotaped during this study.

Please initial:        ☐ Yes        ☐ No

*[If applicable]* I give consent to be photographed during this study.

Please initial:        ☐ Yes        ☐ No

*[If applicable]* I give consent for my quotes to be used in the research; however, I will not be identified.

Please initial:        ☐ Yes        ☐ No



## EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN SAUDI ARABIA

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Subject's Name:

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Signature of Subject

Date

I have discussed the above points with the subject or, where appropriate, with the subject's legally authorized representative.

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Signature of Person Who Obtained Consent

Date



**Appendix C: Qualitative Interview Questions**

- i. How did you learn about SOPEL?
- ii. Why did you want to participate in the SOPEL program?
- iii. How were you prepared for participation in the SOPEL program before you arrived in the UK for the first phase of the program?
- iv. Can you give an example of a learning activity during the Oxford phase of the program that was particularly helpful to you? Were any activities unhelpful?
- v. What did you perceive to be the instructors' expectations of you?
- vi. How do you feel the educational content at Oxford was made relevant to you personally?
- vii. How did you feel the activities at Oxford could be applied to your context as a Saudi educator? Can you give an example of an activity that was a particularly good or poor fit?
- viii. How much did you feel the Oxford faculty was aware of Saudi culture and customs?
- ix. Can you think of any occasions when you did not feel there was a cultural fit?
- x. What were your most important takeaways from your experience at Oxford?  
Can you give an example?
- xi. As you moved into the next phase of the SOPEL program, you were asked to create a final project showcasing your learning. What sources of inspiration,

educational challenges or problems, or personal goals did you draw from in creating your project?

xii. What outside forces did you feel affected your performance and experience in the program?

xiii. While working on your final project for the SOPEL program, how did you communicate with the other participants and members of your professional community?

xiv. How will your final project be useful to you in your professional goals?

xv. Is there anything about your final project that may not be useful?

xvi. How would you describe your experience in presenting your final project?

xvii. How did participating in SOPEL change you as a leader? Please give an example if you can.

xviii. How do you plan to use your experiences in the SOPEL program in your professional career?

xix. How do you think your experience in SOPEL affected your beliefs or practices about leadership?

xx. What was your overall impression of the SOPEL program?

xxi. Please provide any additional information, elaboration, or insight that you feel would be relevant to this study.



**Appendix D: SOPEL Interview Data Codebook**

Name	Sources	References
Academic and Professional Background	4	5
Changing Ideas	1	1
Exam	5	5
Final Project	10	15
Gender	2	2
How did you learn	6	6
Inspiring Leaders	6	9
Most important takeaway	7	7
Networking Benefit	5	5
Personal Interests	3	4

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Politics	2	2
Preparation for SOPEL	5	6
Professional Development	4	4
Reason for Participation	5	6
Room for Improvement	5	6
Saudi Culture – Difference	5	6
Speakers	2	2

**Appendix E: SOPEL Final Project Data Codebook**

Nodes

Name	Sources	Reference
	s	
Need for Improved Training	4	4
21st Century Skills	5	5
Importance of Internet/Technology	3	5
Private Sector Involvement	5	7
Evaluation Framework for Program	5	5
Collaboration	2	3
School Administration	2	2
Merging Innovation with Saudi Culture	3	3
Drawbacks of Bureaucracy	2	2



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Importance of Ministry Support/Enforcement	4	5
Empowerment/Teacher-Led Change	3	4

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